



## REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN KARNATAKA: ANALYZING THE ROLE OF CASTE

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### **Abstract**

*This paper critically analyses the role of caste in the regional parties and politics of Karnataka. The Karnataka is playing a strategic role in Indian politics since its creation as a new geographical region. Regional parties in Karnataka aim and follow step to step approach to achieve various interests of the state. The activities of regional political parties take place in geographical areas; these regional parties role in capturing the power is limited to sub-regional and state level. The caste plays a very significant role in Karnataka politics. The nature, organization and operations of political parties, interest groups and all political institutions and activities are all determined by caste. The primary goal of this paper is to examine the role of caste in Karnataka politics and how it has evolved into a major concern. This paper aim to find a clear conclusion of different effects of caste on voting behavior in the electoral process.*

**Keywords:** *Karnataka Politics, Caste, Religion, Electoral Process, Regional Political Parties, National Parties.*

### **Background:**

India is one of the largest democracy in the world, in such a democracy and political system, political parties both national and regional parties play an important role. As any other democracy, political parties represent different sections among the Indian society and regions, and their core values play a major role in the politics of India. India is multi - party system, where there are a number of national as well of regional parties. A regional party may gain a majority and rule a particular state. In India the number of regional parties is more than the national parties and in some states such as Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Regional parties play a significant role in local administration. Despite, Regional political operates within very limited area and has a very few objectives, they play a significant role both in the state as well as national politics (Shastri: 2011).

Karnataka is distinct in many ways, including the Kannada dialect and regional cuisine. Other languages spoken include Tulu, Konkani, Tamil, Telugu and possibly Marathi, Because of this reason a single regional party could not effectively coalesce every individual's interest in Karnataka. Furthermore, in contrast to national political parties' broad objectives, regional political parties offer the interest, demands and requirements of a specific region. Regional parties focus much on specific concerns like water, the creation of local economic possibilities and addressing people's local needs among others. The most important service provided by regional parties is that they have brought numerous political and economic issues to the notice of people in rural places contributing to political awakening.

### **History of Karnataka Politics :( 1970 – 1999)**

Karnataka politics began to undergo significant changes roughly 50 years ago. Early in the 1970s, the State's ruling class's social power blocs began to morph, a process that forever altered the face of power politics. With the advent of a centrist alternative in the Janata Party in the mid-1980s, the Congress' monopoly was broken (renamed later as the Janata Dal). After the Janata Dal's split in the late 1990s, Karnataka became the first state in the South to host the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party. Political



contests that arose in response to these changes ensured a more equitable distribution of political power among various social groups, reducing the dominance of the two major caste groups — the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas — though they continue to wield disproportionate power and influence in State politics to this day. The split in the Congress in 1969 between the organizational wing, which was represented by the party's old guard, and a faction led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, threw Karnataka's political equilibrium into disarray. Following the split, the State was led by the Congress government, which had the support of a number of stalwarts. The Congress side led by Indira Gandhi appeared pale in the face of the old guard's authority. D. Devaraj Urs, the state president of Indira Gandhi's faction, was a relatively unknown figure at the time. The Congress had good support from the two dominating classes from whom it drew its mainstay. Urs woven together a coalition of the economically weaker sectors among the two dominating castes and traditionally disadvantaged social groups, including as OBCs, SC/STs, and minorities, in a peculiar blend of class and caste in politics. In the 1972 Assembly election, this socioeconomic formula was successful. The Indira Gandhi faction, subsequently known as Congress (I), won 165 of the 216 seats, defying all political calculations. The Congress (I) also won 149 of the 224 seats in the 1978 Assembly elections. The number of OBC members in the Assembly climbed from 18 in 1967 to 36 in 1972 and 45 in 1978. Clearly, the hold of the disadvantaged social groups in the power structure enhanced vis-a-vis the two dominants, landed castes. Urs fell out of favor with Indira Gandhi and eventually parted ways with the Congress after the 1978 elections, but by then he had substantially changed the social sub-structure of the Congress in Karnataka. Urs was not from an OBC caste. Hailing from the erstwhile ruling family of Mysore, he was “the calmly efficient aristocratic Chief Minister” as a news magazine had described him. However, his politics ensured that in the 40 years after him the State had four OBC Chief Ministers, whereas all Chief Ministers before him hailed from one of the two dominant castes. "Urs moulded disadvantaged people into such a potent force that no party that came to power after him, including the BJP, dared to deviate from substantial power sharing between them and the two dominating castes," writes British scholar James Manor. In the Second Phase, The second big shift in Karnataka politics occurred in 1983. For the first time in Karnataka's history, the Congress had lost control in the Assembly elections that year. Ironically, Urs, who gave the Congress a new lease on life in the 1970s, was indirectly responsible for state politics taking a decidedly non-Congress turn the following decade. After he quit the Congress and lost power in 1980, Urs floated a regional party called Karnataka Kranti Ranga. Urs died in 1982 but his outfit survived with its own share of factional feuds and splits to fight another day. The Kranti Ranga joined hands with the Janata Party, now constituted primarily by leaders from the anti-Indira Congress faction of the previous decade. The combine won against the Congress in 1983 election by emerging as the single largest party and formed the first non-Congress government with the outside support of the BJP, which won 18 seats. The new government, under Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde, appeared refreshingly different for the first two years in office despite its precarious numbers. Waiting for an opportunity to consolidate the Janata Party, Hegde dissolved the Assembly after the Lok Sabha elections in December 1984, in which the Congress scored an impressive win leaving just four seats to the ruling Janata Party. In the mid-term Assembly elections, held just three months later in March 1985, the Janata Party bounced back with a clear majority. The 1983 results were not a fluke. The era of a two-party competition was here to stay. The BJP, whose fortunes plummeted to a mere two seats, was a minor third player, for the time being at least. As the Congress cultivated a new social base during the Urs era, the Janata Party now became the new arena of battle for supremacy between the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats.

The party's inherent tensions prevented it from maturing into a cohesive political entity, despite some savvy handling by Chief Minister Hegde. The factional wars were at their height during the second term



of the Janata Party's leadership (1988–89). After becoming embroiled in a series of scandals, Hegde, a Brahmin and the party's compromise candidate between the feuding Lingayat and Vokkaliga power blocs, was forced to retire. S.R. Bommai, a Lingayat from North Karnataka who succeeded Hegde, exacerbated the caste wars inside the party, resulting to the installation of President's rule in early 1989. The Janata Dal, as the Janata Party became called, fell poorly in the same year's election, and the Congress took control. The Janata Dal's fortunes rapidly reversed in this political snakes and ladders, and it returned to power in the 1994 Assembly elections. H.D. Deve Gowda, the uncrowned head of the Vokkaligas, was the Chief Minister this time. However, he shifted to the Centre 15 months later to become Prime Minister. J.H. Patel, the Lingayat who succeeded him as Chief Minister, was also a Lingayat. During this tenure, both groups shared power, but with Mr. Gowda's return to the State after being deposed as Prime Minister in less than a year, it was a repeat of the same old story of caste-based political dissension. Mr. Patel remained in power until the following elections, but in the end, Mr. Patel was defeated eventually on Caste lines. By 1999, Mr. Gowda led the Vokkaligas in the party to form the Janata Dal (Secular). The Lingayats under Mr. Patel grouped together as the JD (U) and aligned with the BJP (Narayana: 2020).

### **Emergence of Regional Political Parties in Karnataka:**

Listing below are few of the most Regional political parties in Karnataka;

**Praja Paksha-** The party was founded in 1930. The objective of the party was to establish a responsible government in Mysore's princely state. The party won support in rural areas by emphasizing the concerns of farmers. In 1934, The Praja Paksha and Praja Mandali formed the Praja Samyukta Paksha (Mysore people's Federation). From 1935 until 1937, Reddy was the organization's president. After merging with the Indian National Congress, the federation took part in the Indian independence movement. In 1937–38 and 1946–47, Reddy served as president of the Mysore Congress. In addition, he was a member of India's Constituent Assembly.

**Karnataka Janata Paksha -** Karnataka Janata Paksha (KJP) was a Karnataka-based political party. It was launched in 2012 and disbanded in 2014 after uniting with the Bharatiya Janata Party. B. S. Yeddyurappa, the Chief Minister of Karnataka, led the delegation. On November 30, 2012, Yeddyurappa resigned as a member of the Legislative Assembly and from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJPprimary)'s membership. On December 9, 2012, the party was formally formed at a convention in Haveri, which drew hundreds of people.

In the 2013 Karnataka Legislative Assembly Elections, the party under the leadership of Yeddyurappa won 8 of the 203 seats it had contested and garnered nearly 10 percent of the total votes polled. Despite not making any significant gains in the polls, the party was able to limit the BJP to just 40 seats, down from 110 in the previous parliament. Despite the fact that the KJP was founded as a branch of the BJP, it did not espouse Hindutva as its philosophy, instead opting for a centrist social democratic approach with a secular viewpoint.

**Karnataka Pragnyavantha Janatha Party -** Puthurina Muthu D. Mahesh Gowda formed the Karnataka Pragnyavanta Janata Paksha. He founded the party in January 2015, registered for official registration on January 19, 2016, and declared it publicly on August 12, 2017, using the campaign slogan "Prajakeeya." Upendra Rao, a veteran Kannada actor, gave the party its official debut on October 31, 2017. The party believes in people-centered politics and skill-driven leadership.



**Urs Samyuktha Paksha-** (Urs United Party) is a political party in Karnataka. Hari L. Khoday, a businessman, created USP on January 16, 2004. USP's mission is to fight for the rights of the Backward Castes. The USP believes that it upholds the heritage of Devaraj Urs, the former Chief Minister of Karnataka. USP ran three candidates in the Lok Sabha elections of 2004.

**Lok Shakti** – The party is also known as People's party. Lok Shakti party was formed by Ramakrishna Hedge, as a vehicle to carry forward his political career and challenge his traditional rivals within the Janata party/ Dal, Deva Gowda, who had been instrumental in ensuring his exclusion from the party. The Lok Shakti party provides window of opportunities to assess the political trends in the state in the later half 1990's. The Lok Shakti represents, a branch of the "Janata Parivar" an instrument seeking justice and its due share for the "Ancestral political legacy".

### **Caste and Politics in Karnataka:**

Karnataka has a long history of anti-caste movement. The Basaveswara movement, C.R Reddy reforms, ShyamSundar'sBeemSena, and Basavalingappa'sBhusa Uproar are major stages of anti-caste movement in Karnataka. The formation of Dalit Sangarhsa Samiti (DSS) changed the discourse of Karnataka politics by educating, organizing and fighting for Dalit political, economic, social and cultural rights.

DSS began as one of the first organized forms of Dalit struggle for Dalit empowerment in Karnataka in the early 1970s. An incident at the University of Mysore, which was organized by Dr. Ambedkar Vichara Vedike and the Backward Classes Student Forum — all students from caste-oppressed families — was one prominent reason for the founding of DSS at the time. B. Basavalingappa, a powerful Dalit state minister at the time, made a public remark at the ceremony, claiming that all Kannada literature was just 'boosa' (cattle fodder). It was against this backdrop that Dalit intellectuals and writers rose to prominence, leading to the foundation of DSS. In addition to this occurrence, DSS was discovered to be fighting an increase in atrocities against Dalit's at the time. Prof. B. Krishnappa, one of the DSS's founding members, provided the DSS with a strong theoretical and ideological framework. They promised as an organization to promote and work with Ambedkarite theory. They also drew inspiration from and supported all political figures that advocated for Dalit empowerment through Marxist, Leninist, and other socially progressive ideas. Land disputes and societal concerns experienced by Dalit's were prioritized in the beginning. Protests against 'bettale seve' (a ritual involving the naked public parade of Dalit women devotees), intentional police neglect, caste atrocities, Dalit education, efficient reservation implementation, and land reforms were among the other major topics addressed by DSS. DSS began publishing the 'Panchama' weekly in 1985. (The fifth in the order, untouchable). Sangati (organization), a commercial weekly, followed soon after. "Jati bidi, Mata bidi, Manavathege jeva kodi!" is a popular DSS slogan that is still heard throughout Karnataka. (Reject caste, sect, and give humanity life!). D.S.S' claimed mission was to "emancipate and free the Dalits from socioeconomic and cultural enslavement by nonviolent means." They planned to nationalize all private land, industry, and wealth in the country to achieve this goal, with the ultimate goal of creating a casteless and classless society. Because of the DSS's diligent efforts, strong Dalit political leadership arose in Karnataka during the next few decades (Ashwini: 2019). For more than three decades now, elections in Karnataka have been linked with caste equations and the two communities - Lingayats and Vokkaligas - who have dominated the political situation. Despite lack of leadership, statesmanship, qualifications, or the ability to nurture their constituency, caste have played a larger influence in the selection of candidates and their viability than any other element. Even national parties like the BJP and the Congress have openly backed Karnataka's caste politics, while the JD(S), as a Vokkaliga party, has successfully used the caste issue. In fact, the two most dominating communities are given seats by all three parties. Whether it's Lok





Sabha or Assembly elections, candidates are chosen solely on the basis of caste, with the percentage of Vokkaliga or Lingayat voters (or Kuruba in some cases) in a constituency determining the outcome. In the last assembly polls, if the Congress identified more than 100 seats for the three castes — Vokkaligas, Lingayats, and Kurubas, the BJP was not far behind, with 75 seats for Lingayats and barely 20% for Vokkaligas. If North Karnataka is the heartland of the Lingayats, Old Mysore is the Vokkaliga stronghold. In both of these regions, the BJP and the Congress have fielded either Lingayats or Vokkaligas. "It was the Lingayats (who were out of power for 12 years from 1971 to 1983) that developed the culture of caste politics in Karnataka," argues political analyst Mohan Ram. They couldn't stand Devraj Urs' domination, so starting in the 1980s, they tried to seize power by injecting the caste component into Karnataka elections". Caste aspect came into play because there is no political ideology as such in our state dividing the groups, unlike our neighbor's," says RLM Patil, a political scientist. As a result, caste is the only thing that divides society, as there are no ideological differences among senior leaders. Even the state's strongholds of the Communist Party have vanished. We are moderates, not hardliners, and we take the middle road. So, caste has a role in elections... yet there is no huge wave in the state this time around. As a result, it's simple to caste as a villain in elections" (Bhardwaj: 2019).

There are a variety of reasons as to why caste is an important aspect of electoral process, firstly caste is today an important "SECULAR" identity. When this identity helps a person go places, then why should the politicians not make use of such identity? Caste helps promote an identity, it helps an individual position himself in social relationships, social life and most importantly it helps an individual gain votes, Thus we can say that caste "COUNTS" ( Shastri : 2011) According to voters data at the time of 2013 ,Karnataka assembly poll and 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the backward class estimated of 30% of all the voters, They were followed by the SCs/STs (23%) , Lingayats (17%) , Vokkaligas ( 15%) , Muslims (9%) and upper class (6%). In 2015, there was another set of data which was a caste census at the cost of Rs 150 crore in Karnataka. Though the data is not officially available, some figures have leaked out. According to these reports, the lingayats and vokkaligas are the most numerically strongest voting communities in Karnataka (Dutta: 2018).

### **Karnataka State Assembly Elections (2018)**

After Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the 16th general elections in 2014, the state of Karnataka had its 15th assembly elections in May 2018. The Karnataka elections were eagerly anticipated because of various developments and changes in the country, such as lynching or killing of Dalit's and Muslims, assassination of human rights activists, destruction of status, and intolerance across the country, all of which were major political and social factors that drew the country's attention to the state elections in Karnataka (Kumar: 2018).

Every other day, various events occurred that added to the importance of the Karnataka state elections. A key issue was also the growth of sectarian groups in coastal Karnataka. The BJP, VHP, and Bajrang Dal are all said to have strongholds in coastal Karnataka. Hindu-Muslim hostilities arose as a result of these circumstances. Communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in Mangalore and other regions of coastal Karnataka has lent a communal tint to political methods that appear to be based on religion. Simultaneously, a BJP member of parliament, Ananth Kumar Hedge, made several racial, casteist, and anti-constitutional remarks that incited hostility towards some marginalized communities. In his rallies, he also called Muslims terrorists and referred to Dalit's as dogs. All of this resulted in state-sanctioned communal violence and distrust (Kumar: 2018).



The government of Karnataka implemented a variety of social security programmers, such as Anna Bhagya, Indira Canteen, housing, farmers loan waiver, solar park, irrigation, infrastructure amenities, women and child development policies, and so on, which influenced the common man of Karnataka. The Karnataka state budget for 2017-18 contained a soft spot for the agriculture sector and other welfare initiatives that benefited students, such as free laptops, free education for female students, and scholarships, which drew the attention of the rural vote bank. By advocating a separate Karnataka flag and removing Hindi name boards from metro stations, then-Chief Minister Siddaramaiah used the concept of Kannada Sub-nationalism (Kumar: 2018).

The congress party, on the other hand, has political support from marginalized groups such as Dalit's, Muslims, and Adivasis. In Karnataka, the majority of the media and press were in favor of the BJP. However, many of businesses across the country were forced to close as a result of Demonetization, resulting in job losses and the deaths of many people. People have lost trust and faith in the Modi government since the concept of "ACHHE DIN" was not guaranteed (Kumar: 2018).

Furthermore, demographic initiatives played a significant role in securing votes from specific areas. Karnataka is crucial for parties like the BJP to form their administration. The social-political dynamics of Karnataka, however, are significantly different from those in the northern states. The Lingayats' separate religious status, the Mahadayi river dispute, and farmer suicides all had to alter the picture for the Karnataka state elections. Karnataka is a difficult state to forecast. This is due to the fact that, unlike other Indian states, the southern state does not vote in a uniform manner. Coastal Karnataka, Bombay Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, Central Karnataka, Bengaluru and Old Mysore are the six Political regions of the state.

### **Mysore Karnataka: Siddaramaiah vs. Deve Gowda**

Mandya, Mysuru, Chikkaballapur, Chamrajnagar, Ramanagar, Hassan, Kolar, Tumkur, Kodagu and Bengaluru rural districts make up this region. The BJP has a small representation in this area, Therefore the struggle is primarily between the Congress and JD(S). While Siddaramaiah's AHINDA ( Alpasankhyataru Minorities ), Hindulidavaru( Backward classes ), and Dalitaru ( Dalit's ) vote bank is crucial to his success , the JD(S) is highly reliant on the strong Vokkaliga Population( Pareek:2018) .

### **Mumbai Karnataka: The Epicenter of Lingayat Politics**

The Bombay Karnataka area was one of the main reasons for the Congress's victory in 2013, when it swept 31 of the 50 seats. The districts of Belgavi, Hubballi-Dharwad, Bagalkote, Vijayapura, and Gadag are part of a bipolar conflict between the Congress and the BJP in the region. In this region, the Lingayat issue, the Mahadayi water dispute, sugarcane prices, drought, and farmer suicides were the most spoken and controversial topics. The Bombay Karnataka region, dominated by the Lingayats, is a longstanding BJP stronghold. The BJP's Lingayat vote was split three ways in the previous assembly elections. One group remained loyal to the BJP, another to B.S. Yeddyurappa's Karnataka Janata Paksha, and a third to the Congress. With Lingayat strongman Yeddyurappa back in the fold, the BJP is hoping to consolidate the Lingayat vote and emerge as the region's largest party this time around. Siddaramaiah's decision to advocate a new religious tag for the Lingayats, on the other hand, is being interpreted as an attempt by the Congress to split the Lingayat vote, as it did in 2013. The popularity of former chief minister B.S. Yeddyurappa and the supremacy of the Lingayats are also considered as giving the BJP an advantage in the region (Pareek: 2018).



### **Hyderabad Karnataka: Advantageous for Congress?**

The Hyderabad-Karnataka region, which was once part of the Nizam's Hyderabad state, is one of Karnataka's least developed areas. 40 seats are distributed across the districts of Ballari, Yadgir, Koppal, Raichur, and Kalburgi. The region's demographics are particularly fascinating. The numbers of Muslims, Schedule Castes, and Schedule Tribes are large. The Lingayats have a significant vote here as well. Except in 2008, when the BJP won thanks to the Reddy brothers' growing influence, the region has been a Congress stronghold (Pareek: 2018).

### **Bengaluru: The Silicon Valley**

Bengaluru stands out in a state where caste combinations and equations affect and dominate politics and election results. Civic problems, infrastructure, development, party connections, and candidates have the greatest influence on Bengaluru voters. The BJP's strength has always been in urban regions across the country, and even in Bengaluru, the BJP has always had the upper hand. Whereas the congress party has always focused on the urban poor with popular schemes like “Indira Canteens”, pitch for separate state flags and introduction of Kannada boards in metro stations which has greatly helped the urban poor to survive in the Metropolitan city, With such schemes lead by the congress party, it managed to beat the BJP in this region ( Pareek:2018).

### **Central Karnataka: Yediyurappa’s Home Ground**

Central Karnataka contains the four districts of Shivamoga, Chitradurga, Davangere, and Chikkamagluru, as well as the home turf of the BJP's chief ministerial candidate B. S Yeddyurappa. The Congress, the BJP, and the JD(S) are in a three-cornered contest, each with their own pockets of influence in the region. In 2018 elections BJP banged the second highest seats from this Region and huge support from this Region (Pareek: 2018).

### **Coastal Karnataka: The Hindutva Hotbed**

Karvali, or coastal Karnataka, is a beautiful place. The Arabian Sea that runs down its shore is complemented by lush green paddy fields filled with coconut and arecanut trees. It could have been an excellent, peaceful location to live, but in recent years, the area has turned into a communal tinderbox. A minor altercation might quickly escalate into a full-fledged communal riot. In some areas, Hindus are prohibited from selling land to Muslims and vice versa. Communal violence in the region date back to the 1990s, when riots erupted following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Since then, the region has served as a political testing ground for Hindutva ideologies. Being the Hindutva Hub, it was obvious that BJP could secure the highest Seats in this region (Pareek: 2018).

### **Conclusion**

For decades, regional parties have governed Tamil Nadu and undivided Andhra Pradesh, and now Telangana as well. Kerala has its own set of alliances. Karnataka, on the other hand, stands apart due to the lack of strong regional parties. In this state, the national parties-the Congress, the Janata Dal (Secular), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) , continue to dominate electoral space (Murthy: 2019). Karnataka has never had a history of large support for regional parties, largely because they were all formed by rebel leaders without any ideology and a specific motive. Most Regional parties were Caste, Religion, leader Centric. None of the parties made a serious attempt to cater to regional aspirations of the state. The Karnataka Electorate has very much Nationalistic outlook that is it focuses more on national parties than regional parties. Hence, we see no single regional political party ruling in Karnataka. As a result, regional political parties have played a substantial influence in both state and national politics. The people of the country and the state should wisely choose between caste politics or



progressive development of the country. Therefore, the citizens must give preference for the visionary Government. Even though caste counts and matters, it still remains as a hurdle to the development of the state and the Country.

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