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"Power and Identity: How Caste Shapes Politics in Karnataka"

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ABSTRACT:

The objective of this comparative study is to analyse the correlation between caste identification and political mobilisation in the Indian state of Karnataka. The political terrain of the state is renowned for its intricate caste relations, wherein several caste communities have substantial political clout. This study seeks to understand how caste identity influences political mobilization in Karnataka through the analysis of political parties, their ideologies and strategies. This study takes a comparative approach by examining several political parties, including both regional and national parties, to assess their commitment to caste-based politics. We examine how political parties mobilize voters along caste lines, the extent to which caste-based mobilization influences electoral outcomes, and the role that political ideology plays in shaping these power relations. Additionally, the study also addresses the historical context of caste-based mobilization in Karnataka, including the important role that social movements and caste-based organizations play in shaping the state's political landscape. Furthermore, the influence of economic factors, educational attainment, and urban-rural disparity on the relationship between caste identity and political mobilization is also investigated. Research methods include a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, this includes examining electoral data, party manifestos, and speeches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the strategies political parties use to mobilize voters based on caste identity. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on caste and politics by providing a nuanced analysis of the relationship between caste identity and political mobilization in Karnataka. The findings will provide insight into the complexity of caste-based politics and its impact on state electoral outcomes. This study will be useful both to scholars studying the intersection of caste and politics and to policy makers seeking to understand and address caste-based mobilization in Karnataka and other regions with similar movements.

Keyword: Caste identity, Political mobilization, Karnataka, Comparative study, Political parties, Caste-based politics, Electoral outcomes.

Introduction:

The political situation in India's Karnataka state is heavily influenced by caste identity. Vokkaligas and Lingayats are his two major caste groups that have historically played an important role in the country's politics. The Indian National Congress (INC) is the dominant political force in Karnataka and has ruled the state for nearly 50 years. Caste was an important factor in determining election outcomes, and political parties competed to shore up the support of these influential caste groups. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is also a major player in Karnataka's political scene, and its success in the state has been linked to its engagement with these caste groups. The BJP has aligned itself with the Lingayats, while the Congress has sought support from the Vokkaligas, Muslim minorities and Dalits. The interplay of caste identity and political mobilization continues to shape the dynamics of electoral competition within the state. Scholarly opinion very clearly describes Vokkaligas and Lingayats as the "dominant" castes, and their dominance in national politics is well known. Politics in Karnataka is deeply intertwined with social and caste structures, and the influence of these dominant castes is an important aspect of political power relations in the state. In summary, Karnataka's political landscape is characterized by the influence of dominant caste groups, particularly Vokkaligas and Lingayats, in shaping electoral outcomes and party strategies. The interplay between caste identity and political mobilization remains an important factor in state politics, with political parties seeking to shore up the support of these influential caste groups to ensure electoral success.

How does caste identity influence political mobilization in Karnataka?

Caste identification exerts a substantial influence on political mobilisation in Karnataka, India. The Vokkaligas and Lingayats are two prominent caste groups that have traditionally had substantial influence in the political landscape of the state. Political parties in Karnataka aim to strengthen their support base by garnering the backing of these significant caste groupings in order to ensure election victory. The Indian National Congress (INC) has requested backing from the Vokkaligas, as well as the minority Muslim and Dalit communities, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has formed an alliance with

the Lingayats. The interaction between caste identities and political mobilisation remains influential in determining the dynamics of electoral competitiveness in the state (Lakshman, 2011). The development of politically influential social groupings has been an underlying theme in the narrative of electoral politics in Karnataka, as political parties have fostered and subsequently lost support from various social groups throughout time. (*Election 2023: How Rival Parties in Karnataka Found, Lost and Nurtured Social Groups over the Years*, n.d.).¹ Caste not only determines one's role in political institutions, but it also influences access to resources like land as well as police and judicial assistance (*Caste Politics - Wikipedia*, n.d.).²

How do political parties in Karnataka appeal to different caste groups?

Political parties in Karnataka strategically create alliances with the leading caste groupings in the state in order to appeal to and get support from diverse caste groups. The Indian National Congress (INC) aims to garner the backing of Muslim minorities and Dalits, as well as Vokkaligas, whereas the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is connected with Lingayat. (*Caste Is Still Key. Blame It on Voters*, n.d.). The Janata Dal (Secular) has been identified as the party of the Vokkaligas who control the old Mysore region. (*Caste Is Still Key. Blame It on Voters*, n.d.) The BJP is predominantly regarded as a political party in the coastal region, Malenadu, and North Karnataka. One caste group that is noted for its support of the party is the Billabhas, who are regarded as authentic Dalits. Bhovi and Lambani are further factions under this classification that have maintained an affiliation with the BJP for a considerable duration. (*Caste Is Still Key. Blame It on Voters*, n.d.). During the first decades of electoral politics, only her two communities, the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas, fully ruled the state. (*Caste Is Still Key. Blame It on Voters*, n.d.) The emergence of election-oriented social organisations in Karnataka is a consequence of the state's electoral politics, wherein political parties have been instrumental in both fostering and losing such groupings throughout time. Political parties in Karnataka seek to gain support from different caste groupings by actively seeking votes based on allegiance to certain castes and sub-castes. (*Caste Is Still Key. Blame It on Voters*, n.d.)

The impact of caste identity on political mobilization in Karnataka:

Caste identity has a significant impact on political mobilization in Karnataka, with political parties aligning themselves with dominant caste groups to secure support.

The main effects of caste identity on political mobilization in Karnataka include:

- **Political alliances:** Political parties often form regional or smaller parties to strengthen support among different caste groups. Form alliances with caste-based political parties.³
- **Reservation and Quota:** Political parties undertake to ensure reservation and quota for certain caste sets, especially Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs)
- **Development and Welfare Programs:** States parties focus on announcing development and welfare programs tailored to the specific needs of different caste groups, including: Education, Medical and Financial Assistance.⁴
- **Identity Politics:** Parties exploit identity politics by appealing to caste group identities and sense of belonging and pledging to protect and promote their interests.⁵
- **Language and Cultural Identity:** In regions where language forms a fundamental part of identity, political parties respond to the concerns of various caste groups in promoting Kannada language and culture.
- **Regional Inequality:** The Parties will work to address issues of regional inequality and ensure that all regions of Karnataka receive a fair distribution of resources and opportunities.
- **Election-related social group construction:** Election-related social group structure has been a connotation of the history of electoral politics in Karnataka, with political parties advancing and losing social groups over the years. By addressing these important issues, political parties in Karnataka aim to win the support of various caste groups and secure votes in elections.⁶

Political Mobilization in Karnataka: A Tapestry of Caste, Identity, and Strategy:

Karnataka's political landscape is characterized by a complex interplay of caste identities, social movements, and strategic mobilization. Understanding this phenomenon requires a multifaceted approach that focuses on different actors and forces:

Major caste mobilization numbers:

Lingayats: Their population size (16%) and internal divisions make them important battlegrounds. As the Congress struggles to regain support, the Bharatiya Janata Party has been able to capitalize on its cultural ambitions and anti-Congress sentiment.

Vokkaligas: Traditionally a Congress supporter, their growing alienation started his shift towards JD(S) to represent their interests. The BJP is also trying to woo her, leading to a tug-of-war between the three parties.

¹ <https://www.newslandry.com/2023/04/12/election-2023-how-rival-parties-in-karnataka-found-lost-and-nurtured-social-groups-over-the-years>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_politics

³ https://leitner.yale.edu/sites/default/files/resources/papers/Dunning-and-Nilekani_March-2011-1.pdf

⁴ https://leitner.yale.edu/sites/default/files/resources/papers/Dunning-and-Nilekani_March-2011-1.pdf

⁵ https://leitner.yale.edu/sites/default/files/resources/papers/Dunning-and-Nilekani_March-2011-1.pdf

⁶ <https://www.newslandry.com/2023/04/12/election-2023-how-rival-parties-in-karnataka-found-lost-and-nurtured-social-groups-over-the-years>

- **Beyond Dominant Castes:** Other Backward Classes (OBC): A diverse and large group (30%), but their political preferences are more fragmented. While Congress has traditionally been in the lead, the BJP and JD(S) are increasingly competing for support through targeted aid and welfare programmes.
- **Scheduled Castes (SC):** Historical marginalization fuels political advocacy. While parties like BSP specifically address their needs, others struggle to balance their demands with broader coalition politics.
- **Scheduled Tribes (ST):** A dispersed population and unique challenges complicate their mobilization. Regional parties and committed leaders play an important role in strengthening their voice.

Caste-based party formation Karnataka:

The emergence of political parties based on caste in Karnataka has been a prominent characteristic of the state's political environment for many years. This matter is intricate, having a lengthy chronicle, intricately connected to social and economic reality. Here is an analysis(Virk, n.d.):⁷

Background information:

The unification of Karnataka in 1956 amalgamated several regions characterised by prominent castes, such as Lingayats in the northern part, Vokkaligas in the southern part, and other communities like Jains and Christians residing along the coast. In 20th-century politics, Congress initially had a dominant position. However, in the 1970s, Devaraj Urs emerged as a strong contender by uniting smaller, marginalised castes under the "AHINDA" flag, which stands for minorities, backward classes, and Dalits in the Kannada language(*Lingayats and Vokkaligas Rule the Roost in Karnataka Politics | Mysuru News - Times of India*, n.d.).⁸

Key participants:

The Indian National Congress (INC) has historically enjoyed significant support among minority communities and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, the party is currently grappling with internal rifts and intensified rivalry from other political factions. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has seen increasing popularity during the 1990s, especially among the Lingayat and urban electorate. However, they have also made efforts to attract support from the Vokkaliga community and Other Backward Classes (OBCs)(*Lingayats and Vokkaligas Rule the Roost in Karnataka Politics | Mysuru News - Times of India*, n.d.).⁹

The Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S)), established by H.D. Deve Gowda, primarily garners its support from the Vokkaligas and farmers. It frequently plays a pivotal role in determining the outcome of elections in situations when no one party has a clear majority. Additional participants: Several minor political parties cater to certain caste groups, such as the BSR Congress, which represents the Banjaras, and the Karnataka Makkal Paksha, which focuses on the Valmiki people.

Dynamic processes and their resulting outcomes:

- **Electoral politics driven by vote bank considerations:** Political parties frequently prioritise the appeasement of certain caste groups through the formulation of pledges and policy choices, potentially leading to the disregard of more encompassing concerns.
- **Social stratification:** Although caste can serve as a means of representation, it can also reinforce social divides and impede the formation of wider political coalitions.
- **Changing allegiances:** Caste associations are not necessarily fixed, and voters may opt for political parties based on other considerations such as leadership or track record.
- **The Role of Caste Leaders:** For many years, caste has played a significant role in determining Karnataka's political climate. Election results are influenced and voter mobilisation is greatly aided by caste identification. Key actors in this dynamic have evolved as caste leaders—people with significant power within certain caste groupings(*Caste Is Still Key. Blame It on Voters*, n.d.).¹⁰

Historical Background:

Dominant Castes: Vokkaligas and Lingayats, two significant castes, controlled Karnataka politics till the 1970s. They frequently held great political and economic power at the cost of other castes.

- **Emergence of Backward Classes:** Feeling excluded by the dominant groups, backward castes saw a surge in political consciousness throughout the 1970s. These communities were empowered when Devaraj Urs, the Chief Minister at the time, put laws like reservations in employment and education into effect. The "Ahinda" alliance (Other Backward Classes and Minorities) was formed as a result, and it went on to become a powerful force in state politics(*Caste Is Still Key. Blame It on Voters*, n.d.).¹¹

⁷⁷ https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1641&context=cmc_theses

⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/lingayats-and-vokkaligas-rule-the-roost-in-karnataka-politics/articleshow/14807930.cms>

⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/lingayats-and-vokkaligas-rule-the-roost-in-karnataka-politics/articleshow/14807930.cms>

¹⁰ <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/caste-is-still-key-blame-it-on-voters-1211517.html>

¹¹ <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/caste-is-still-key-blame-it-on-voters-1211517.html>

- **Caste realignment and the growing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** The late 1980s saw the BJP gain prominence, which further confused the caste system. The BJP deftly courted many caste groupings, causing intricate realignments and the disintegration of customary caste-based voting patterns (*Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) | History, Ideology, & Beliefs | Britannica*, n.d.).

Caste leaders' role:

Caste leaders serve as a conduit for political parties and their communities, facilitating mobilisation and representation. They engage voters in conversation, respond to their issues, and bargain with political parties to get funding and representation. Community gatekeepers: They frequently restrict who has access to opportunities and resources inside their communities, which bolsters their power. Kingmakers and Power Brokers: In areas where a sizable portion of the population is from their community, caste leaders can have a considerable impact on the results of elections. They are useful partners for political actors because they have the ability to sway votes in favour of specific candidates or parties (*Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) | History, Ideology, & Beliefs | Britannica*, n.d.).¹²

Problems & Issues:

Rise of Populist Politics: The emphasis on caste-based mobilisation can occasionally give rise to populist politics, in which politicians put their communities' immediate needs ahead of more general development objectives. Competition and Fragmentation: Political stability can be hampered by competition between various caste groups and their leaders, which can cause fragmentation. Meritocracy vs. Social Justice: The debate about reservations and affirmative action persists; some contend that it compromises meritocracy, while others view it as necessary to achieve social justice (*How BJP's Own Fragmenting of Social Justice Politics Led to the Bihar Caste Census*, n.d.).¹³

Some Karnataka examples of powerful caste leaders are:

- H.D. Deve Gowda: a well-known Vokkaliga leader and former Indian prime minister.
- Siddaramaiah: An important member of the Ahinda movement and a former Karnataka chief minister.
- B.S. Yediyurappa: Well-known Lingayat leader and former Karnataka chief minister.

Caste-based voting patterns in Karnataka:

The political climate of Karnataka is characterised by firmly entrenched caste-based voting patterns, which, although not uniform, have been subject to change throughout time. Below is an analysis of many significant patterns:

Majority Castes:

- **Lingayats:** Historically aligned with the BJP, however recent internal discord within the party and efforts by the Congress to attract their support may lead to some changes in their political allegiance.
- **Vokkaligas:** Historically aligned with the JD(S) party, however a considerable portion also tends to choose the Congress party, and in certain cases, even the BJP, depending on local circumstances and the attraction of the candidates (Sathish, 2023).¹⁴

OBCs:

The AHINDA alliance, which is an abbreviation in Kannada for All Backward Classes, Hindus, and Muslims, was established by Devaraj Urs with the objective of enhancing the empowerment of these people. Initially, there was widespread support for Congress. However, support has been more splintered over time. Congress still has a solid base, particularly among Dalits and some OBC sub-castes. The BJP has also gained influence (Sathish, 2023).¹⁵

Dalits and Adivasis:

Historically, the Congress party has had a strong support base, however the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made significant progress in recent times, especially among some Dalit sub-castes.

Supplementary Variables:

Local concerns and individual characteristics of candidates can occasionally override caste allegiances, particularly in tightly contested elections. Economic factors: Socioeconomic stratification may influence voting patterns, with lower-income segments tending to support the Congress party and higher-income groups favouring the BJP. Religious polarisation: Although caste continues to have greater sway, religious affiliation, especially Hindu nationalism, has been increasingly significant in recent times, affecting voting behaviour.

Current Patterns:

¹² <https://thewire.in/politics/bjp-narendra-modi-social-justice-caste-census-obc-dalit>

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bharatiya-Janata-Party>

¹⁴ <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/karnataka-assembly/dominant-caste-narratives-drown-out-other-voices-in-poll-arena/article66819716.ece>

¹⁵ <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/karnataka-assembly/dominant-caste-narratives-drown-out-other-voices-in-poll-arena/article66819716.ece>

Caste fluidity: Although traditional loyalties continue to exist, newer generations exhibit a lesser degree of inflexibility in their voting habits, taking into account additional criteria such as ideology and performance. The emergence of new political parties: Smaller regional parties that appeal to distinct caste groupings may disrupt the outcome in some areas. Social engineering refers to the deliberate selection of candidates from dominant castes in particular seats with the aim of maximising their share of votes (“Lessons in a Loss,” 2023).¹⁶

Illustrations:

- In the 2023 Karnataka Assembly elections, the BJP emerged as the party with the greatest number of seats, but failed to secure a majority, hence emphasising the divided nature of the caste composition.
- Despite its Vokkaliga majority, the JD(S) experienced a decline in support from Vokkaliga-dominated regions, with some voters shifting their allegiance to the Congress and BJP.
- Congress strengthened its influence among the AHINDA communities.
- It is crucial to bear in mind that these are general patterns, and there are instances that deviate from them due to regional dynamics and particular elections.

Finely the correlation between caste identification and political mobilisation in the state of Karnataka. The objective is to provide a comparative examination of various political parties functioning inside the state. The research aims to examine the influence of caste on political party affiliations and the tactics used by political parties to garner support based on caste identity. The study aims to offer valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of caste-based politics in Karnataka and enhance our comprehension of political mobilisation in the region (“Lessons in a Loss,” 2023).¹⁷

Conclusion:

Ultimately, the reorganisation of social groups based on caste and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the late 1980s resulted in substantial transformations within the caste system and voting behaviours in Karnataka. Caste leaders played a significant role in mobilising their communities and serving as middlemen between political parties and voters. They possessed the authority to limit entry to opportunities and resources inside their communities, rendering them crucial in determining the outcome of elections as kingmakers and power brokers. Nevertheless, the emergence of politics based on caste has also given rise to some problems. Populist politics occasionally places greater importance on the urgent needs of particular communities, rather than on wider development goals. Inter-caste rivalry and competition among leaders can undermine political stability and result in disintegration. The ongoing discourse on reservations and affirmative action persists, with proponents contending that it undermines meritocracy, while others perceive it as indispensable for achieving social justice.

The political dynamics of Karnataka are influenced by firmly established voting patterns based on caste; however, these patterns are not consistent and can be altered. Traditionally, Lingayats have been politically associated with the BJP, whilst Vokkaligas have allied themselves with the JD(S) party. The AHINDA coalition, which encompasses marginalised social groups, Hindus, and Muslims, initially garnered extensive backing for the Congress party. However, as time has passed, the support has gradually fragmented. Historically, Dalits and Adivasis have been known to align themselves with the Congress party. However, there has been a noticeable shift in their political preferences as they have started to demonstrate growing support for the BJP in recent years. In addition to caste issues, local concerns, individual candidate traits, economic variables, and religious affiliations all influence voting trends.

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¹⁶ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/lessons-in-a-loss-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-2023-karnataka-assembly-election-result/article66850262.ece>

¹⁷ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/lessons-in-a-loss-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-2023-karnataka-assembly-election-result/article66850262.ece>

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