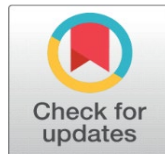


THE INTERPLAY OF CLASS, CASTE, AND IDEOLOGY IN SHAPING POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN KARNATAKA

Dharmanna Madar ¹ , Dr. Basavaraja G ² 

¹ Research Scholar, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University Tumkur

² Professor, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University Tumkur



Corresponding Author

Dharmanna Madar,
Dharmu.madar@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.4217](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.4217)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

From 1956 to 2020, when the state transitioned from linguistic rearrangement to a centre of socio-political contestation, this study explores the intricate interactions between class, caste, and ideology in forming political identities in Karnataka. The paper examines how conflicting ideological frameworks—such as socialism, social justice, and Hindutva—interact with intersecting caste and class hierarchies to affect political mobilization and voter behavior. It does this by drawing on historical analysis, election statistics, and qualitative fieldwork. It contends that, in addition to neoliberal economic changes and urbanization, the assertion of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits, and marginalized groups has increasingly transformed Karnataka's political environment, which was historically dominated by the dominant castes (Lingayats and Vokkaligas). According to the analysis, caste is still a fundamental axis of political identity, but class-based concerns, especially in urban informal labor markets and rural problems, mitigate its salience. From the socialist movements of the 1970s and 1980s to the Hindu nationalist ambition of the BJP, ideological narratives have purposefully allied themselves with or opposed these identities in order to gain power. Ideologies can be used as a weapon to transcend or strengthen caste-class divisions, as seen by the BJP's Hindutva politics and the Janata Dal's social justice agenda. The flexibility of identity politics in the state is further illustrated by case studies of linguistic subnationalism, land reforms, and reservation disputes. However, the analysis highlights ambiguities in Karnataka's democratic trajectory by identifying tensions between the ideology's emancipatory ideals and their co-optation by elite groups. Structural injustices endure in spite of progressive programs, made worse by neoliberal policies and dispersed opposition. The article's conclusion provides a more comprehensive understanding of the contradictions of identity-driven democracy in India by pointing out that Karnataka's political identity is a dynamic, contested landscape where caste solidarity, class interests, and ideological hegemony converge.

Keywords: Caste-Class Dynamics, Political Identity, Lingayats, Vokkaligas, Hindutva, Social Justice, Electoral Mobilization, Neoliberal Urbanization, Karnataka Politics, And Political Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Karnataka, often hailed as a progressive hub due to Bengaluru's global tech prominence, remains paradoxically rooted in traditional caste-based politics. The state's political identity is shaped by three overlapping axes: **caste** (Lingayats, Vokkaligas, Dalits), **class** (urban middle class vs. rural agrarian communities), and **ideology** (Hindutva, socialism, secularism). While scholars like James Manor (1989) have emphasized caste as the primary determinant of electoral behavior, recent trends—such as the BJP's 2019 sweep in urban constituencies and the Congress's rural welfare appeals—suggest a reconfiguration. This article asks: *How do caste networks adapt to class-based grievances and ideological polarization?* It employs a mixed-methods approach, combining historical analysis of post-independence land reforms, ethnographic insights into caste mutts, and statistical scrutiny of voting patterns. The study also addresses the paradox of Bengaluru—a city that elects neoliberal reformers like Tejasvi Surya (BJP) while

neighboring regions like Mandya prioritize caste-based JD(S) loyalties. By examining the 2018 coalition government's collapse (Congress-JD(S)) and the BJP's subsequent rise, the introduction frames Karnataka as a laboratory for India's evolving identity politics¹.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

- 1) Examine the relationship between political mobilization and caste identification. Examine how Karnataka political parties use caste to organize voters, how much caste-based mobilization affects election results, and how political ideology shapes these power dynamics.
- 2) Analyze how caste and religion affect election tactics: Examine the ways in which Karnataka political parties use caste and religious affinities to influence policy-making, candidate selection, and campaign rhetoric.
- 3) Examine how caste and class supremacy have changed over time in Karnataka politics: Examine how Karnataka's caste, class, and political power dynamics have been influenced by historical elements like as pre-colonial societal structures, British colonial control, and post-independence developments.
- 4) Examine the current caste, class, and ideological factors in Karnataka politics: Examine how social movements, caste identities, and strategic mobilization interact to shape political identities and election results in modern-day Karnataka.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The British colonial definition of "martial" and "servile" castes replaced the balutedari (artisan guilds) of the Vijayanagara Empire as the basis for Karnataka's caste structure. The Vokkaligas solidified agrarian control in the Old Mysore region, while the Lingayats, a reformist sect that opposed Brahminical hegemony in the 12th century, evolved into a landed aristocracy under Mysore monarchs. Caste-based landownership was solidified by colonial land tax laws (such as the Ryotwari system), which resulted in a hierarchy that forced Dalits into bonded labor. The Land Reforms Act (1974) upended feudal systems after independence, giving OBCs more power while marginalizing Dalits. In opposition to the Congress's Brahmin-Vokkaliga alliance, Devaraj Urs and Ramakrishna Hegde rose to prominence in the 1980s and promoted backward caste empowerment through the Janata Party. An ideological shift was signaled by the BJP's 1990s arrival, which capitalized on the Ayodhya movement and Lingayat mutt networks. Historical tensions reappear in contemporary politics: the 2017 call for separate Lingayat religious status, which the RSS opposes, is reminiscent of the anti-caste agitation of 19th-century reformer Basava. As a result, Karnataka's past is an active force in its political present rather than a static backdrop².

Karnataka's Caste Dynamics

In Karnataka, caste is organized into three groups: Dalits (Madigas, Holeyas), OBCs (Kurubas, Idigas), and dominating castes (Lingayats, Vokkaligas). Vokkaligas (15%) rule the rural Old Mysore belt, while Lingayats (17%) control the political and commercial spheres of North Karnataka. An example of the BJP's dependence on Lingayat support is B.S. Yediyurappa, whose resignation in 2019 caused a crisis and cost the party 12 MLAs. In the meantime, caste-based regionalism is reflected in the Vokkaliga's allegiance to the JD(S), a party that H.D. Deve Gowda has accused of dynasticism. Despite making up 24% of the population, Dalits are still politically divided; the Madiga-Dalit Sangharsh Samiti advocates for sub-caste quotas, while the Karnataka Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), which leans left, organizes against atrocities. By exposing intra-caste hierarchy, the 2021 Panchamasali agitation—a Lingayat sub-caste calling for OBC status—challenges the BJP's rigid caste narratives. As kingmakers, caste groups such as the Akhila Karnataka Vokkaliga Mahasabha bargain with political parties for reservations and ministerial positions. However, education and urbanization are weakening inflexible ties: according to a 2022 Lokniti-CSDS survey, 34% of Bengaluru's youth place a higher value on "development" than caste, indicating a slow shift.

Caste Leaders: Power Brokers and Middlemen

¹ Rajasekhariah, A. M., Jayaramu, P. S., & Jayraj, H. (1987). Karnataka: Ideology And Politics. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 48(4), 575–596.

² Manor, J. (1977). Structural Changes in Karnataka Politics. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12(44), 1865–1869.

In Karnataka, caste leaders serve as crucial go-betweens, converting communal complaints into political capital. This role is shown by individuals such as D.K. Shivakumar (Vokkaliga) and B.S. Yediyurappa (Lingayat), who use their caste identities to mediate power between parties and constituencies. As demonstrated by his 2008 promise to allot ₹1,000 crore for the Lingayat-dominated North Karnataka region, Yediyurappa's power stems from his ability to portray Lingayat interests as being identical with state development³. In a similar vein, Shivakumar's control over the Vokkaliga-dominated Kanakapura seat highlights how caste leaders use specific welfare programs, such as farm loan exemptions, to strengthen regional allegiance. Their authority is not uncontested, though. Top-down caste leadership flaws were exposed by the Panchamasali Lingayats' 2021 uprising, which demanded OBC classification in defiance of Yediyurappa's resistance. According to a 2022 CSDS-Lokniti study, 42% of Karnataka's urban electorate cited unemployment as their main worry, ignoring caste-based appeals. Younger, urbanized voters are increasingly prioritizing governance over patronage⁴. As a sign of the transition from overt caste discourse to aspirational politics, Yediyurappa's son, B.Y. Vijayendra, has reinvented himself as a "development-focused" Lingayat leader. The paradox of caste leadership is that it empowers communities while maintaining fragmentation, as demonstrated by the difficulties Dalit leaders like Prakash Ambedkar have in bringing sub-castes together (Madigas vs. Holeyas)⁵.

Political Identities and Class

Political class in Karnataka is sharply divided along urban-rural lines. The BJP is gaining ground in districts like Bengaluru South, where Tejasvi Surya received 58% of the vote in 2019, thanks to the city's tech corridors, which are home to a growing middle class and place a high priority on infrastructure and economic liberalization. In contrast, support for the JD(S), which advocates for MSP guarantees and farmer debt waivers, is fueled by agrarian misery in areas like Kolar and Mandya. While its 2019 collaboration with tech-friendly Nandan Nilekani targeted urban voters, the Congress's 2023 guarantee initiatives (such as Gruha Lakshmi for women) appealed to the impoverished in rural areas. Caste and class are closely related; wealthy Dalits in urban areas tend to support Congress because of its secularism, while poorer Dalits in rural areas support the BSP because of its identity-based policies. A new elite has also emerged as a result of economic liberalization: caste-agnostic businesspeople who contribute to cross-party campaigns, weakening established networks of patronage. Class unity was demonstrated in 2020 when Lingayat and Vokkaliga farmers came together across caste lines to fight the Farm Laws. Voting trends are complicated by class mobility, though, since upwardly mobile OBCs in urban areas could embrace the BJP's Hindutva because of its aspirational symbolism, while their rural counterparts dismiss it as Brahminical. These differences are shown by Karnataka's Gini index (0.38 in 2021), which shows how class can both unite and split political environments⁶.

The Expanded Role of Ideology

Three poles frame ideological conflicts in Karnataka: the BJP's Hindutva, the Congress's secularism, and the JD(S)'s agricultural socialism. Even though Lingayatism has always rejected caste, the BJP's ideological mission, which is based on Hindu nationalism, deliberately co-opts Lingayat identity by siding with mutts like Siddaganga. In order to maintain voter allegiance, Yediyurappa tacitly supported the Lingayats' desire for recognition as a non-Hindu minority, which the RSS opposed. This conflict erupted in 2017. Through initiatives like the Indira Canteen, the Congress, on the other hand, frames itself as a secular bastion and gains support from Dalits and Muslims, who make up 13% of the population. Its ideological flexibility, however, reveals pragmatism over principle, as demonstrated by the 2018 collaboration with JD(S). Reflecting the difficulties of caste-driven socialism, the JD(S), which has its ideological roots in Lohiaite socialism, nevertheless maintains Vokkaliga domination. The 2020 strikes against labor code revisions demonstrate how the Left, despite its marginalization, shapes discourse through Dalit and labor unions. Youth ideology is changing: according to a 2023 Prathi Druksha study, 37% of participants between the ages of 18 and 30 place a high priority on environmental measures, which encourages political parties to embrace green agendas. The BJP's 2023 campaign minimized Hindutva in favor of "double-engine growth," while the Congress used communal divisiveness as a weapon in coastal Karnataka.

³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/lingayats-and-yediyurappa-factor-back-in-spotlight-in-karnataka-politics/article35483731.ece>

⁴ <https://www.csdsonline.org/lokmiti>

⁵ BREEDING, M. E. (2011). The Micro-Politics of Vote Banks in Karnataka. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(14), 71–77.

⁶ Pinto, A. (2013). KARNATAKA POLITICS: IDEOLOGY, PARTIES AND POWER. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 74(2), 369–374.

However, ideology frequently yields to electoral calculations. Karnataka, where doctrine is a tool rather than a commitment, is therefore a perfect example of India's intellectual mobility.

The Impact of "Matas"

In Karnataka politics, religious organizations (matas) have unmatched sway because they combine electoral tactics with spiritual authority. Using its extensive educational and charitable network, the Siddaganga Math, under the leadership of the late Shivakumara Swami, has supported candidates from all political parties. When the Murugha Math's seer ran for Lingayat minority status in 2018, he put pressure on the Congress government to suggest the designation to the Center. However, the central leadership of the BJP stopped this attempt. Matas also serve as cultural arbiters. For example, the Suttur Math's Jathra Mahotsavas are secret political gatherings where candidates ask followers for blessings (and votes). They have an impact on policy as well; the Anti-Superstition Bill (2017) was weakened as a result of the Udupi Pejavar Math's objection to it. However, matas are not homogeneous; divisions separated over political affiliations after Shivamurthy Murugha Sharanaru of Murugha Math was arrested in 2022 in a POCSO case. Although they rarely question systemic casteism, matas such as the Nidumamidi Math provide Dalits with symbolic inclusion. On the other hand, progressive mutts who support Ambedkarite initiatives, such as the Basava Dharma Peetha, call for the eradication of caste. As demonstrated in the 2023 elections, the BJP's cultivation of mathadipatis (mutt heads) as campaigners underscores their significance in legitimizing Hindutva. Younger generations, however, criticize matas as being backward; when the Siddaganga Math forbade intercaste weddings in 2021, demonstrations broke out. Matas represent Karnataka's dual identity as both defenders of tradition and contentious locations of contemporary politics⁷.

Voter Behavior

Caste, class, and ideology are all reflected in Karnataka's electoral behavior. While Vokkaliga-heavy Old Mysore is still JD(S) territory (20 seats in 2023), the Lingayat-dominated Kittur Karnataka region has been a BJP stronghold since 2008 and will provide 40+ seats in 2023. However, Dalit votes split: in 2023, the Congress won 60% of SC/ST seats by promising caste-specific programs such free electricity, or Bhagya Jyothi. Urban regions exhibit volatility: middle-class disenchantment with Hindutva rhetoric amid infrastructure crises is seen in Bengaluru's 28 seats, which went from Congress in 2013 to BJP in 2018 and back to Congress in 2023. The gap between nationalized and state-level issues was highlighted by the BJP's 2023 Assembly defeat and its 2019 Lok Sabha sweep (25/28 seats). Coalition politics make patterns even more complicated. For example, the Vokkaliga-Lingayat conflicts caused the 2018 Congress-JD(S) alliance to fall apart, while the BJP's Operation Lotus (2019) used caste-based incentives to steal MLAs. Contradictions are revealed by micro-level studies: although the Brahmins of nearby Udupi place a higher priority on development, the BJP's Hindutva appeals to Billava (OBC) traders in Dakshina Kannada. Welfare politics saw a return in the 2023 election, as the promises made by the Congress outshone the communal narratives of the BJP. However, the electorate of Karnataka is still changing; according to a 2023 CSDS post-election study, 28% of Lingayats and 19% of Vokkaligas had changed parties since 2018, indicating a decline in caste allegiance. The state's shift from identity-based to issue-driven politics is exemplified by this volatility⁸.

4. IN CONCLUSION

Caste, class, and ideology are constantly renegotiating power in Karnataka's dynamic political environment. Urbanization and economic stratification are creating new coalitions, even as Lingayats and Vokkaligas continue to hold structural supremacy. In the 2023 election, the Congress brought together Dalits, Muslims, and OBCs under a welfare umbrella, while the BJP's Hindutva failed due to poor governance. Although they still play a crucial role, matas and caste leaders are facing existential issues as young people demand accountability. The state's path reflects India's larger democratic development, in which aspirational government and identity politics coexist. The ability of parties to combine caste representation with class justice and ideological coherence will determine the outcome of future elections. The experience of Karnataka, which combines modernity and tradition, provides a guide for negotiating India's divided yet heterogeneous democracy. The politics of the state may possibly redraw the lines of identity in a worldwide society as class consciousness increases and mutts struggle with modernity.

⁷ S. S. (1990). Caste and Power Game in Karnataka. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(42/43), 2359–2360.

⁸ Singh, N. (1992). Dalit and Caste Hindu Clashes in Karnataka. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27(3), 83–84.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Pani, N. (2017). Experiential regionalism and political processes in south India. *India Review*, 16(3), 304–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2017.1346405>
- Iyer, S., & Kunale, B. P. (2022). Karnataka land reforms 2020: what is in it for Dalits? *Area Development and Policy*, 9(1), 108–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2022.2129703>
- Agarwal, S., & Levien, M. (2019). Dalits and Dispossession: A Comparison. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 50(5), 696–722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1597145>
- Arabaghatta Basavaraj, K. (2022). Digital campaigning in Karnataka. *South Asian History and Culture*, 13(3), 361–378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2022.2058172>
- Pinto, A. (2013). KARNATAKA POLITICS: IDEOLOGY, PARTIES AND POWER. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 74(2), 369–374. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24701122>
- Karnataka: Unprincipled Politics. (2007). *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(41), 4088–4088.
- Ahmed, Y. R. (1980). MUSLIM REPRESENTATION IN KARNATAKA VIDHAN SABHA. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 41(1), 91–99.
- RAJASEKHARIAH, A. M., JAYARAMU, P. S., & JAYRAJ, H. (1987). KARNATAKA: IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 48(4), 575–596.
- Manor, J. (1977). Structural Changes in Karnataka Politics. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12(44), 1865–1869.
- Yatanoor, C., & Vishnuvardhan. (2012). MULTICULTURALISM AND POLITICS OF EXPRESSION OF DALITS IN KARNATAKA. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 73(4), 691–698.
- BREEDING, M. E. (2011). The Micro-Politics of Vote Banks in Karnataka. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(14), 71–77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41152055>
- Karnataka: Unprincipled Politics. (2007). *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(41), 4088–4088.