



Caste Politics in Karnataka: Analysis of Dalit Political Participation and Dalit Leadership

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted on: 26-03-2025

Published on: 15-04-2025

Keywords:

Karnataka politics, Dalit political participation, Dalit leadership in politics,

ABSTRACT

The roles of family, communities, literature, religion, culture, and language in shaping and developing a good society are extraordinary. Throughout the history of the world, religion in society has provided good morals, customs, and values to human beings. It was not an alternative to Indian society, but in the name of religion, there is no less superstition, superstition, and caste system in Indian society. The caste system started in its worst form with varnas as a part of religion in India. Inequality in society starts with the caste system and has a decisive influence on monarchy. Inequality in society started with the caste system and continues in present-day politics. But caste is a reality in India; it is also a reality that elections are held on the basis of caste in electoral politics. For this reason, there is a lot of caste politics in Karnataka, which has been a reality for many decades. But if the dominant castes benefit from this caste car,. The castes of the basic communities are not able to bring their personalities, leadership, and community unity to politics. Especially this is the crisis of the political status of Karnataka Dalit communities. Since the beginning of electoral

politics in Karnataka, these deprived communities have been in a state of oscillation in their current politics. Because in the political history of Karnataka, in the last 70 years, no one from the Dalit community has been able to rise to the post of Chief Minister of the state. Also, the political participation of Dalits is limited to reserved areas. In some general constituencies, one-to-one representatives are elected. Because of this, in this article, the influence of caste politics in Karnataka, the gains and losses of caste politics, and the political participation of Dalit communities and Dalit leadership can be analysed.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15223750>

Introduction

In India, prominent critics and thinkers of the caste system are Jyothia Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and Ramamanohar Lohia.

Dr. Ambedkar famously said in 1932, “There have been many Mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability, elevate, and absorb the depressed classes, but every one of them has failed. Mahatmas have come and gone, but untouchables have remained as untouchables.” Dr. Ambedkar believed that the status of lower-caste individuals could be improved through imperialism. Hence, on many occasions.¹ Dhananjay Keer regards Ambedkar as among the foremost leader of Dalits in India who played a critical role on raising dalit consciousness. In his work, ‘Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development’, Ambedkar identifies caste as an important institution, which is practiced by no other civilized society, past or contemporary.² Later Ramanavara Lohia are important in changing the analysis of caste system in India. Their book 'Caste System' and Hindi book 'Jati Prada' are in their writings. Lohia's thoughts against casteism included the need to eliminate inequality between men and women. Lohia identified five marginalized communities in India, women, Shudras, Harijans, Muslims, and Adivasis. Lohia's argument was that thinkers such as the great sociologist Max Weber, who said that

¹“Ambedkar: The Intellectual Who Transformed India.” *Youth Ki Awaaz*, 14 May 2020, <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2020/05/maker-of-modern-india-dr-b-r-ambedkar/>.

²Sleepyclasses Discuss Ambedkar’s Views on Caste in India and Its Annihilation. *Sleepy Classes IAS*, 25 June 2022, <https://sleepyclasses.com/discuss-ambedkars-views-on-caste-in-india-and-its-annihilation/>



merit emerges from opportunity, have misunderstood the caste system.³ Caste-based discrimination and exclusion have characterised the socio-political fabric of Karnataka for centuries. Dalits, comprising over 19% of the state's population, have faced severe oppression under the Hindu caste system. Despite legal abolition, caste practices like untouchability continue in many rural place, denying Dalits basic human rights and dignities. Politically, upper-caste groups like Vokkaligas and Lingayats have dominated the power structure in Karnataka, marginalising Dalit interests. However, recent decades have witnessed growing Dalit activism and identity politics as the community has become more conscious of its political rights.

Objectives

- ✓ To analyze caste factors in karnatka politics
- ✓ To understand Dalit participation in Karnataka Legislative Assembly
- ✓ Understanding the role of dalit leadership in the Karnataka political history.

Caste Factors and Structural Changes in Karnataka Politics

Politics in Karnataka has long been dominated by two groups, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, who together make up about a third of the population. The Congress Party has ruled the state for decades by building patronage networks with influential leaders of these groups as well as some leaders of excluded groups. In 1972, Indira Gandhi appointed D. Devaraj Urs, who is not part of the dominant groups, as Chief Minister to try to loosen their grip on power. Urs has taken deliberate measures to undermine Lingayats and Vokkaligas, including: Laws to help poorer groups, like debt relief and distribution of housing sites Major land reform law giving tenants ownership and imposing ceilings Ban on appeals against pro-tenant decisions of local land tribunals. This is shifting the Congress base towards poorer groups, though significant socioeconomic transformation has not occurred yet. Lingayats and Vokkaligas have not mounted significant resistance, likely due to Urs co-opting key leaders, the loss of the evocative power of Lingayat identity, and independent changes like secret ballots. While the Urs

³Lohia, Rammanohar. *Jāti paddhati*. Edited by Naṭarāj Huḷiyār, Translated by Hasan Nayīm Surakōḍa, Prasārāṅga Kannaḍa Viśvavidyālaya, 2022



regime has also been highly corrupt, its initiatives laid the groundwork for major changes in the social base of politics in Karnataka.⁴

As in Andhra, Telangana, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh etc., Karnataka also has dominant castes. Reddy-Kammas in Andhra, Telangana, Marathas in Maharashtra, Patels or Patidars in Gujarat, Jats in Uttar Pradesh, and two castes are historically recognized as dominant castes in Karnataka. They are Lingayats and Okkaligas. .Actually the number of Lingayats and Okkaligas is not very large. They constitute 26 percent of the total population. Until recently, the centers of politics and power were under their control. These two dominant castes took opposing positions during the repartition of the Mysore state. There were reasons for this. The fear that repartition might change the caste equation in Mysore state was at work here. That is, the Lingayats of North Karnataka would become dominant in Mysore state. A serious belief that the predominance of one would decrease was at work here. But the reality was different. After repartition, these two castes managed to gain control over not only politics but also land. .It was made possible by defeating a phased-in Land Bill, and this kind of politics continued into the 1970s. After Devaraj Aras became Chief Minister, his hold was somewhat reduced, but not completely destroyed. Especially those who have benefited from reservation are the dominant castes, the reservation implemented since 1919 has benefited the dominant caste more than the lower castes. In contrast to this is the condition of the backward castes, even though there was reservation in Karnataka, even though there was a caste belonging to the backward caste in pre-independence, there was no great change in their status. The majority of the backward classes remained as rural classes, sharecroppers, agricultural laborers, peasants engaged in traditional clan occupations.⁵ Political and economic change became a mirage for them. That is why they did not grow powerful in the political and economic framework until the 1970s. At the same time, some common people all over India and in Karnataka. A concept must be said. It is about caste. Often we see caste as a homogenous social framework and social identity without any varieties, small/sub-castes. This is half truth. The reality is that within each species there are hundreds of smaller species. This applies to the context of Karnataka. It can be seen in Lingayats as well as Okkaligas. The minor castes among Lingayats are: Jangama, Matapati, Panchamashali, Kuduvakkaliga, Banajiga, Ganiga, Hugar, Kumbhar, Badigar, Navaliga (Hadapad),

⁴Manor, J. (1977).Structural Changes in Karnataka Politics.*Economic and Political Weekly*, 12(44), 1865–1869<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4366061>

⁵Assadi, Muzaffar H. *Asmite, rājakāraṇa mattu mūlabhūtavāda: kelavu cintanegaḷu*. First edition, Laḍāyi Prakāśana, 2017



Madiwal, A similar situation can be seen among the backward castes: Kumbara, Agasa, Bede, Naindu, Idiga, according to one calculation, the lowest among the Okkaligas. There are more than 90 smaller species. Apart from Kolhapur and Travakur states, the old Mysore state was the first state to give reservation. For the first time, the old Mysore state reserved 75 percent of the posts for the backward classes. This may be the first step of identity politics. In this politics, the dominant castes, not the backward classes or castes, benefited the most. Because the dominant castes were included in the list of these backward castes, the benefits inevitably went to them. Moreover, the power of the political framework was also in their hands. On the one hand there was social assimilation or amalgamation of backward class and dominant castes, on the other it gave way to assimilation of upper castes. Minorities and Dalits were the least beneficiaries of this politics. In 1951 the appeasement policy of Congress divided communities into 18 groups and gave them specific reservations. This was argued on social grounds. Politics is different, the Congress had to expand its social base and appease everyone. In fact, during this time, political power was in the hands of a few. Until the early 1970s, power politics was in the hands of the dominant castes, and the dominant castes held the election to power. Chief Ministers came from these castes. Backward castes did not have any status⁶

The one who changed this was Devaraj Aras. For the first time after he became the Chief Minister, the power of the state went from the dominant castes to the backward castes/classes. In 1975, he created the first backward commission and brought about a great change in power politics, reservation politics and asset politics. One of his greatest contributions was the creation of the Havanur Commission. As a result of this, a new social equation of Muslim, backward class and Dalit or "Ahinda" emerged for the first time in Karnataka. It was both fiction and reality. Socially it was fiction. Politically it was also a reality. Popular schemes implemented by Aras- Especially the land reform, abolition of serfdom, the recommendations of the Havanur Commission which were implemented strengthened the base of the Congress. It succeeded in giving political identity to hundreds of small castes. The communities without identity got a presence. Thousands of lower edge leaders were born and were able to grow in the politics of Karnataka. This may be the period of new leadership. Because in this case the most Caste leaders came into politics. Despite all this, the hold of powerful castes in Karnataka politics has not diminished. It can be said that in 2013, even if the Ahinda government came, the administration was only in the hands of

⁶Prakash, Mahadeva. *Horalu Nota: Karnataka Rajakiya Ithihasa Visleshanatmaka Olanota*. 2018th ed., Kavyakala Prakashana, 2018.



the powerful castes. It is a fact that the caste has lost its traditional framework, which creates the inevitability of politics for its identity, society and power politics. This highlights that the society of Karnataka is not homogenous.

Thus three phases can be identified in Karnataka politics

Dalit	➤ Struggle for power for local Brahmins in Mysore State and Brahmins of Madras
	➤ A struggle by all castes against the Brahminical leadership
	➤ Lingayat and Okkaliga politics from 1952 to 1980 (Leo)
	➤ Lingayat and Brahmin (Libra) 2000 to 2012
	➤ Ahinda in 2013 to 2022

Leadership in karnataka politics.

In tandem with mass Dalit politicization, the state has also seen steady growth in political leadership from the community.⁷ The number of Dalit legislators in the state assembly has nearly doubled over the past thirty years. In the current term, 34 MLAs belong to Scheduled Castes, constituting 15% of total representatives. 7 MPs from the state in the 17th Lok Sabha are from Dalit backgrounds. The composition of Dalit leadership nevertheless remains heavily male-centric, reflecting the urgency for internal critiques around Dalit patriarchy and democracy deficits. Women face immense barriers entering electoral politics from regional party gatekeeping practices to financial constraints and threats of caste/gender violence - structural factors reproduce the underrepresentation of Dalit women across decision-making positions. Important exceptions like first-time Chitradurga MP Ajay Singh help demonstrate possibilities for women from oppressed identities to mount successful political campaigns despite systemic odds stacked against them. Their participation is vital to render visible the specific ways caste, class and patriarchal power produce multifaceted vulnerabilities for Dalit women. In terms of party affiliations, the Congress and BJP enjoy the largest Dalit legislative contingents - the present Karnataka assembly has 19 Dalit MLAs from Congress, 12 from BJP and 3 from JD(S). Such membership has granted growing leverage for Dalit politicians to impact internal decision-making around policies, agendas and nominations. The partial dispersal of Dalit legislative presence across

⁷Sōmaśēkhara, Appagere. *Dalita Saṃvēdane: Aṃbēḍkarvādi Cintaneya Barahagaḷu*. First edition, Laḍāyi Prakāśana, 2016.



parties has also fostered inter-party competitions to court Dalit interests. However; notable frictions abound within these organizing arrangements. Dalit politicians across parties face classic dilemmas negotiating aspirations of community representation alongside institutional commitments to upper-caste dominated party machineries. Local Dalit activist Krishnama denounces such co-optation, arguing “These leaders may come from our communities but they are more accountable to their party bigwigs...when push comes to shove, caste loyalties outweigh any empathy for Dalit interests.” There is merit in this critique of embedded constraints curtailing radical possibilities in the current Dalit political leadership paradigm. At the same time, the swelling legislative strength of Dalit politicians, even if centrally aligned at present, signals gradually expanding space to steer pro-Dalit agendas through policy channels. Tensions between grassroots radicalism and institutional co-optation are likely to shape evolution of Dalit leadership strategies. But their enhanced presence inside state structures remains an important inroad.

Dalit Political Participation in Karnataka

Historians record the history of all other categories of leaders in Indian politics. But it is regrettable that the mention of Dalit leadership movements is not so much recorded, Gautham Buddha, Basaveshwara, Mahatma Jyoti Bapule, Periyar, Narayan Guru are concerned about Dalits and the role played by these gentlemen in the development of Dalit leadership is immense. The development of Dalit leadership can be traced back to Ambedkar's struggle to be known as economically, culturally and politically disenfranchised.

The last seventy years have seen Dalit political space expand considerably, both through grassroots activism and electoral mechanisms. This stems from both top-down political empowerment measures as well as subaltern processes of Dalit mobilisation and identity formation. Social movements have been pivotal in raising Dalit political consciousness and pressuring the system for greater representation. This activism intensified in the early 1980s through localised Dalit Sangharsh Samitis that organised at village and mandal levels, using protest means like rallies, sit-ins, strikes, and road/railway blockades for varied demands—protection from caste atrocities, land allotments, access to basic services, implementation of reservations, etc. Organisations like the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti drew heavily from



Dalit discourse and symbols, framing these localised movements as part of a broader anti-caste struggle for emancipation.⁸

These mobilisations significantly shaped Dalit identity in political terms, fostering a sense of shared grievance that could be pressed through electoral and governmental channels. By the late 1980s, under the banner of the Karnataka Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (KDSS), over 300 mini-struggles had erupted in the state. The KDSS has continued to play an anchor role in channelling Dalit socio-political demands, keeping subaltern activism around caste justice alive even amidst periods of official co-optation. Other Dalit civil society groups have furthered community advocacy in spaces like the bureaucracy, judiciary, and media. Prominent among these are DalitAndolanKarnataka (DAK), Dalit Bahujana Vimukti Federation (DBVF), and the Bhim Patrika journalism collective. These platforms highlight grievances of violence and discrimination while also monitoring state delivery performances on Dalit welfare schemes. They tap extensive grassroots networks to generate broad-based solidarity around civil liberties-based Dalit resistance. Such mobilisation has fostered distinct Dalit political subjectivity anchored in cherishing Dalit identity markers—assertive sloganeering of ‘Jai Bhim’, mass gatherings on Ambedkar Jayanti, consolidation around politicised subaltern symbols like the blue flag. This psychosocial consolidation of Dalit identity has profoundly shaped political participation trends. On the electoral front, Karnataka has seen heightened Dalit voter engagement. Turnout rates in reserved constituencies as well as those with large Dalit population shares have climbed significantly in the last 15 years relative to past patterns. In many seats, their turnout matches or even surpasses the state average, exhibiting the efficacy of Dalit identity consolidation.

Research suggests this energised participation is driven by a desire for self-representation rather than loyalty to any one party. Dalits have even come to display their readiness to vote singularly as a bloc to promote community protection and interests. For instance, in Channapatna, Ramanagaram, and Chikkaballapur constituencies during the 2018 Assembly polls, villages and hamlets with over 300 Dalit votes collectively decided to vote monolithically for the candidate that committed to the maximum pro-Dalit agenda. While still an isolated trend, such strategic voting underscores heightened political awareness.

⁸Cinnasvāmi Sōsale, En. *Nālvāḍi Kṛṣṇarāja Oḍeyar kālada Maisūru saṁsthānadalli Dalitaru*. Prasārāṅga, Kannaḍa

Viśvavidyālaya, 2013.

Dalit parties have also begun making minor electoral inroads, benefiting from grassroots energy around Dalit identity politics. The BSP has established pockets of influence, tapping into Dalit aspirations for self-determined political vehicles. In the 2018 Assembly polls, it netted over 170,000 votes, emerging as a player in select reserved seats like Madikeri, Challakere, and Kollegal. The Bhim Army, too, has recently expanded operations in northern Karnataka.

While lacking the strength to win seats on their own, Dalit parties play vital agenda-setting functions in highlighting subaltern interests and keeping alive the vision of emancipatory politics free from elite Savarna domination. Their campaigns compellingly vocalise everyday injustices and structural barriers faced by Dalits, using rhetoric and symbolism that powerfully resonates across grassroots constituencies. Even when votes eventually flow to larger parties, the voices of these organisations help centre political discourse around questions of social justice and Dalit citizenship rights.⁹

This is the list of Shedule caste legislative members for the 2022 Karnataka State Assembly Election.

Shimoga Rural (SC)	Sharada Puryanaik	JD(S)
Mudigere (SC)	Nayana Motamma	INC
Koratagere (SC)	G. Parameshwara	INC
Pavagada (SC)	H.V. Venkatesh	INC
Mulbagal (SC)	Samruddhi V Manjunath	JD(S)
Kolar Gold Field (SC)	Roopa Kala M	INC
Bangarapet (SC)	S.N. Narayanaswamy K.M	INC
Pulakeshinagar (SC)	A.C Srinivasa	INC
C.V. Raman Nagar (SC)	S. Raghu	BJP
Mahadevapura (SC)	Manjula Aravind Limbavali	BJP
Anekal (SC)	B. Shivanna	INC
Devanahalli (SC)	K.H. Muniyappa	INC
Nelamangala (SC)	N Srinivas	INC

⁹Chief Ministers of Karnataka since 1947. <https://kla.kar.nic.in/assembly/review/previouscms.htm>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2022.

Malavalli (SC)	P.M. Narendraswamy	INC
Sakaleshpur (SC)	Cement Manju	BJP
Sullia (SC)	Bhagirathi Murulya	BJP
Nanjangud (SC)	Darshan Dhruvyanarayana	INC
T.Narasipur (SC)	H. C. Mahadevappa	INC
Kollegal (SC)	A.R. Krishnamurthy	INC
Kudachi (SC)	Mahendra Kallappa Tammannavar	INC
Raybag (SC)	Aihole Duryodhan Mahalingappa	BJP
Mudhol (SC)	Ramappa Timmapur	INC
Nagthan (SC)	Katakadhond Vitthal Dondiba	INC
Chittapur (SC)	Priyank Kharge	INC
Chincholi (SC)	Avinash Umesh Jadhav	BJP
Gulbarga Rural (SC)	Basawaraj Mattimudu	BJP
Aurad (SC)	Prabhu B Chavan	BJP
Lingsugur (SC)	Manappa D Vajjal	BJP
Kanakagiri (SC)	Tangadagi Shivaraj Sangappa	INC
Shirahatti (SC)	Chandru Lamani	BJP
Hubli-Dharwad(SC)	Abbayya Prasad	INC
Hadagali (SC)	Krishna Nayaka	BJP
Hagaribommanahalli(SC)	Nemi Raja Naik K	JD(S)
Holalkere (SC)	M. Chandrappa	INC
Mayakonda (SC)	K.S. Basavanthappa	INC

Source 2022 Karnataka Legislative Assembly Election Results

This is the list of Shedule tribe legislative members for the 2022 Karnataka State Assembly Election.

Yemkanmardi (ST)	Satish Laxmanrao Jarkiholi	INC
Shorapur (ST)	Raja Venkatappa Naik	INC
Raichur Rural (ST)	Basanagouda Daddal	INC
Manvi (ST)	G. Hampayya Nayak Sahukar Ballatagi	INC
Devadurga (ST)	Karemma G.Nayaka	JD(S)
Maski (ST)	Basan Gouda Turvihall	INC
Kampli (ST)	J.N. Ganesh	INC
Siruguppa (ST)	B. M. Nagaraja	INC
Bellary (ST)	B. Nagendra	INC
Sandur (ST)	E Tukaram	INC
Kudligi (ST)	Srinivas NT	INC



Molakalmuru (ST)	N Y Gopalakrishna	INC
Challakere (ST)	T. Raghumurthy	INC
Jagalur (ST)	B Devendrappa	INC
Heggadadevankote (ST)	Anil Chikkamadhu	INC

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Impacts on Caste Power Dynamics

What tangible impacts has growing Dalit political participation yielded on the overarching grammar of caste relations in Karnataka? On the one hand, electoral calculations around the Dalit vote bank have provided strong incentives for political parties to take up Dalit interests like never before. Most have appointed Dalit faces to prominent organisational positions, mainstreamed BSP-inspired sloganeering like ‘Jai Bhim’ in campaigns, and incorporated Dalit welfare measures in manifestos.

This symbolises a shifting centre of gravity in favour of Dalit empowerment. Yet whether substantive power redistribution and social dignity follow remains debatable. Across the Karnataka hinterlands, wide chasms between policy mandates against manual scavenging, untouchability, and basic service provision vis-à-vis ground realities persist. Cases of brutal caste crimes and structural marginality expose empty gesture politics that appropriate Dalit struggles without meaningfully confronting status quo interests that enforce inequality on the ground. When in power, the same regional leaders claiming Dalit solidarity have shown reluctance to implement land reforms, affirmative action measures, or devolution of decision-making autonomy to grassroots—initiatives vital to unlocking Dalit development pathways stymied by historical injustices. Rhetoric outstrips actions.

Moreover, the growing force and space occupied by Dalit identity politics have also induced reactive responses from historically dominant groups like Lingayats, Vokkaligas, and Brahmins. Facing perceived threats to social status and privilege access, these elites have at times sponsored violent backlashes against upstart Dalit aspirations. Strategies range from everyday microaggressions in villages to large-scale structural mechanisms that seek to institutionally contain the bahun challenge. This underscores that securing Dalit citizenship, dignity, and power involves struggles on social, political,

¹⁰ 2022 Karnataka Legislative Assembly Election Results



and ideological fronts simultaneously. Legal rights, numerical majorities, and party patrons mean little in altering everyday marginality without a wider cultural transformation that de-centers upper-caste privilege from being the unconscious yardstick of social worth. Here, progress remains slow and piecemeal rather than spectacular and linear. Expanding pockets of Dalit counter-power exist alongside persisting realities of vulnerability, precarity, denial, and fear for communities at the bottom of regional caste hierarchies.

This is the list of scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, legislative members for the 2022 Karnataka State Assembly Election elected in the unreserved constituency.

Tirthahalli	Araga Jnanendra	BJP
Arabhavi	Balachandra L Jarkiholi	BJP
Gokak	Jarkiholi Ramesh Laxmanrao	BJP

An analysis of caste factors in the Karnataka legislative assembly election 2018. Out of 224 seats, 203 members are only selected from six communities, and lingayat and vokkaligas still dominate in Karnataka politics. remening 21 community they don't have stong grip in politics.¹¹

Lingayat	67
Vokkaliga	44
SC	35
ST	15
OBC	24
Muslims	18

Conclusion

In closing, Dalit identity in Karnataka have made important

politics and leadership in advances over the past

decades, even if structural inequalities endure. Mass grassroots mobilisation has fostered strong Dalit solidarity networks, raised political participation, and compelled mainstream parties to court Dalits. Considering that 10 of the 23 chief ministers of the state since 1952 have been Lingayats, it is

¹¹“2022 Karnataka Legislative Assembly Election *Wikipedia*, 5 Nov. 2022,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2022_Karnataka_Legislative_Assembly_election&oldid=1183592139



remarkable that the Lingayat community has had a substantial political impact in the state. Of the 54 Lingayat MLAs, 37 are members of the ruling BJP party. Caste still matters a lot in Karnataka politics because different communities support different political parties. The JDS enjoys substantial support from the Vokkaliga community, but the BJP appears to be holding a firm grip on the Lingayat and OBC votes. The Lingayat, Vokkaliga, and Muslim populations,

Footnotes:

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