

## **Emergence and Consolidation of Rightist Politics in Karnataka**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Hindutva is a political strategy and it has nothing to do with Hinduism or the welfare or benefit of Hindu society. The BJP basically represents the right wing political forces in India. The RSS is the main brain behind all the social and political activities of BJP. The BJP has been improving its presence in Karnataka since 1990s by gaining access to social classes. The steady growth of Hindutva in coastal Karnataka has been accompanied by intense communal polarisation. The intellectuals and activists have called upon the liberal and democratic forces to putforth united struggle against social and economic inequities and injustices. The history of communalism needs to be written with a human touch in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts since the fundamentalists are suffering from the medieval mindset as far as communal relations are concerned. The people of Coastal Karnataka have a great social responsibility and political obligation of preventing the marginality of the weaker sections of society by developing meaningful and powerful social and political alliance for pursuing emancipatory and empowerment centered politics in the new millennium.

**Key words: Rightist Politics, Coastal Karnataka, Marginality of Weaker Sections.**

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## **Preamble**

The Politics of Karnataka is dominated by three major political parties, the Indian National Congress, the Janata Dal Secular and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Indian National Congress has ruled Karnataka for more than 60 years. Hindutva is a political strategy and it has nothing to do with Hinduism or the welfare or benefit of Hindu society. The BJP basically represents the right wing political forces in India. The RSS is the main brain behind all the social and political activities of BJP. The BJP has been improving its presence in Karnataka since 1990s by gaining access to social classes. The emergence and consolidation of rightist politics in Karnataka is examined in this article on the basis of qualitative research methodology.

## **BJP's Rise to Power in Karnataka**

The 1994 Assembly elections established BJP as a firmly entrenched rightist political party in the South. In Karnataka, the BJP had secured about 40 seats in the legislative assembly election in 1994. The BJP has consistently increased its base since 1994 in Karnataka state. The BJP gained substantially after the split in the Janata Dal especially in Karnataka in 1998. BJP had emerged as a significant political party in the political firmament of Karnataka. BJP's rise to power could be attributed to the longstanding work of RSS and its affiliates in the civil society (Parvathy, 1999:08). The BJP had come into existence in Karnataka in 1980. B.S.Yadiyurappa took over the leadership of BJP in 1996, garnered the support of Lingayat community and managed the active participation of Brahmins and Vokkaligas in the state. BJP had to compromise with the sustainability of Hindutva ideology due to electoral compulsions. BJP has to pursue its political goals in accordance with the framework of democratic politics in Karnataka.

## **Coalition Government in Karnataka**

In Karnataka, no political party had enough seats to form a government in 2004. The Congress and JDS formed a coalition government under the Chief Ministership of N Dharam Singh. The government lasted till 2006. But, H.D.Kumaraswamy withdrew support from the Congress and struck a deal with the opposition party, the right wing BJP, to form an alternate government. The new coalition had HD Kumaraswamy as the Chief Minister and B. S. Yeddyurappa of the BJP as deputy chief minister. The two parties had entered into an informal power sharing agreement of sharing the chief ministership for a period of 20 months each.

H.D.Kumaraswamy did not keep his promise and the coalition government followed the rightist political approaches and failed to live upto the expectations of the people.

The BJP consolidated its hold in three pockets of the state: the coastal belt, the Bombay-Karnataka and the Hyderabad-Karnataka regions in the beginning of new millennium. It played the Hindu card and deepened communal divides in the state, while working for a homogeneous Hindutva identity by melding together disparate caste groups. This strategy of inclusion-exclusion has paid the party rich dividends in Karnataka since it enjoyed considerable support from backward sections of society (Philipose, 2006:09).

Karnataka has been in the thick of the news for high level corruption, language chauvinism, spreading canards about Tippu Sultan and raking up religious and communal controversies on place of worship, all by none other than those in power. The coalition partner has found unforeseen opportunity to implement its communal fascist agenda under the JDS-BJP coalition. In this background the worst vitriolic and violent attack on Muslims was organized in Mangalore, Buntwal and surrounding places in 2006.

Undoubtedly over a period of time BJP has built itself up in Karnataka. While BJP did not have any impressive showing in this region, the issue did help it in the communalization of the state as a whole (Puniyani, 2008:11). The Sangh Parivar began by consolidating unemployed youth in the Billava and Mogaveera groups. Neither have strong community organizations, and the Bajrang Dal and Sri Ram Sene filled the gap. Billavas form a majority of Sri Ram Sene cadre and have moved from being followers of Sri Narayana Guru to champions of Hindutva. Mogaveeras have found a niche in the Bajrang Dal. The year 2008 was a take-off point for the Hindu right in Karnataka.

The BJP hoped to cash in on sympathy for having been denied its rightful share of power by its coalition partner. The Janata Dal (S) hoped to reap the benefits of the goodwill earned by its leader and former chief minister Kumaraswamy. It hoped that the state would once again have a hung assembly, catapulting it into the role of a kingmaker. The Bharatiya Janata Party pulled off an impressive win in Karnataka in the May 2008 election through in the initial outcome it was two short of a majority in the assembly. The party was helped to its first triumph in South India by non-stop squabbling in the Congress among its many leaders and erosion in the support base of the Janata Dal (Shastri and Padmavati, 2009:14). BJP won 110 seats in the 2008 elections on the basis of Hindutva plank.

## **Yeddyurappa's Rule in Karnataka**

The disconnect between the Congress and the masses and lack of unity among the secular forces were responsible for the rejuvenation of BJP. The BJP's victory in Karnataka in 2008 clearly reflects the dominance of the Sangh Parivar and caste politics. B.S. Yeddyurappa became the Chief Minister of Karnataka and right wing political forces gained an upper hand over the secular forces. He withdrew several pending cases against Bajrang Dal activists in the state. The Karnataka result is a setback for secularism. The BJP also gained from divisions in the secular vote between the Congress and JD (S) in a three-way contest. Communalism has long been an important factor in the BJP's dramatic growth in Karnataka.

The right wing politics took a different turn in Karnataka after the 2008 Assembly elections. The BJP leaders launched 'Operation Kamal' to manufacture a majority on the floor of the Houses. The party gained greater political leverage and promoted the business interest of the leaders. Subsequently, the BJP government had become a victim of its own contradictions. The people of Karnataka punished the BJP government for the acts of omission and commission.

In Karnataka, the regional parties have failed to make any difference politically. Gundurao, Bangarappa, H.D.Devegowda, B S Yeddyurappa and others could not achieve notable success due to lack of strong ideological conviction and mass support. The JDS claims to be a regional party but it is more family-oriented than cause and mission oriented regional political party in the present times. The BJP took this advantage and consolidated its vote bank on the basis of rightist politics.

The Karnataka RSS has equal representation from the Lingayat and Brahmin communities and Yeddyurappa was supported by both the communities since he bestowed upon them several benefits. The BJP appeared to be unclear of its strategy on how to handle Yeddyurappa. Hindutva vigilantism has found its echo in minority vigilantism, which however is not comparable to its majoritarian counterpart in its striking power. Victims of Hindutva-sponsored violence have little confidence in the impartiality of the BJP government in Karnataka.

The inept and corrupt ways of Yeddyurappa when he was Chief Minister of Karnataka damaged the BJP as well as state. In Karnataka state, the rightist political forces led by BJP have created a miserable political situation where a large number of voters do not just cast their votes

but vote their castes. The BJP's commitment to provide good governance was diluted by the corrupt regime and internal battles.

The BJP party stands publicly discredited and viciously divided between warring factions and caste-based cabals. It would be lucky to retain power in Karnataka without splitting. Yeddyurappa carried money power-based politics to heights never before scaled in India. This deadly combination of communalism, casteism, money power and outright criminality has taken politics to new depths in Karnataka (Bidwai, 2011:01).

The Bharatiya Janata Party is securely enthroned as the ruling party in Karnataka state. The Janata movement has turned into former Prime Minister Devegowda's family-owned JDS party. The Congress, while still commanding a third of the state's vote share, is struggling to revive itself as a potent political force. It is appalling to see how rapidly it has decayed in a decade. All parties deserve a share of the blame for Karnataka's decline (Gowda, 2011:03).

Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa has been seen by his own partymen in the Bharatiya Janata Party as authoritarian, divisive and incompetent. Inclusive, diverse social coalitions have always been needed, since Urs, to win state elections (Manor, 2011:05). The leader lacked standards, self discipline and collective efforts which brought about the downfall of BJP in Karnataka. He failed to carry the masses with him socially and politically. This caused a setback to BJP in Karnataka.

The BJP has not stick to its development agenda but has returned to its old poll tactic in Karnataka state. The 'divide and rule' strategy has not helped the party improve its seat position as the figures prove. It is the secular face these politicians presented which helped them grab a good share of minority community votes (Paniyadi, 2013:07).

### **Failure of BJP Government in Karnataka**

BJP lost the Assembly election in 2013 since Congress demonstrated commitment to social justice and people-friendly governance. It is apt that the election results in Karnataka generate a meaning that goes beyond immediate victors and losers, and has a relevance not limited to the states' borders or political culture. The BJP paid a heavy price for its 'Operation Kamala' strategy in Karnataka. In fact, the Congress should be more than thankful to B.S.Yeddyurappa for this victory (Qureshi, 2013:12).

The Karnataka Janata Party headed by Yeddyurappa assured the voters that it would follow the teachings of B R Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jayaprakash Narayan and function

on the basis of secularism. The party has maintained distance from the RSS to attract secular social and political forces and come to power in Karnataka state. The KJP has no real secular roots. Rather, it is using an opportunistic strategy to gain electoral mileage. The opportunism of the BJP high command is, of course, even more patent (Shivasundar, 2013:15).

Karnataka state assembly remains upper class, upper caste and male dominated, reflecting the power equations prevailing in the society at large. The dominant castes of Karnataka have always grabbed more than half the seats in the assembly, thereby making it an essentially upper caste forum. It was only during the Devaraj Urs regime that the balance tilted in favour of the Other Backward Classes and minorities (Shivasundar, 2013:16).

It emerged as a full fledged ruling party in 2008 under the leadership of B.S.Yadiyurappa with the support of Dalits and forward communities. The party was not able to sustain its political clout due to corruption and conflicts of interest. The party could not gain majority support in the general elections held in 2013 due to anti-incumbency factor. It is now struggling hard to regain its political popularity and power in Karnataka (Satyanarayana, 2013:13).

The Hindu Yuva Sene and Bajarang Dal have emerged as cow vigilantees over a period of time with the support of rightist political forces. The Sangh Parivar sponsored daily violence has led to the worsening of law and order situation in Karnataka. The BJP government had withdrawn 76 cases filed against Bajarang Dal activists. The cultural mobilization by the Hindutva forces today involves the inclusion and assimilation of Dalits and tribals and using them as instruments in the violence against minorities (Pinto, 2013:10).

The blatant corruption, aggressive Hindutva and factionalism have led to the demise of the BJP in Karnataka. A political analysis of the results indicates a serious setback to the BJP. Though the defeat of the BJP was a foregone conclusion even before the election results were declared, the nature of the electoral performance of the party and a closer study of the nature of its defeat unveils how comprehensive and convincing the rejection of the party has been. BJP MLAs in the assembly, rampant corruption and nepotism practiced by the BJP leaders, their high handedness in administration, extreme acts of moral policing, attacks on churches, and attacks on Muslims with blatant state support in the name of preventing cattle slaughter, among many others – gave rise to enormous resentment not only among the Muslims and Christians but also among the traditional voters of the BJP (Shivasundar, 2013:16).

The Bharatiya Janata Party captured political power on its own in 2008 under the leadership of veteran leader B.S.Yadiyurappa. The government implemented several welfare programmes for the benefit of the people. Some constituencies were developed remarkably while political scams and corrupt practices damaged the reputation of the government (Gangadhara, 2016:02).

The five years of saffron rule in Karnataka demonstrates that corruption is not just financial but violation of human rights and victimization of the weaker sections by abusing state power. Blatant corruption, aggressive Hindutva, factionalism and victimization of the weaker sections were primarily responsible for the demise of the right wing political party BJP in Karnataka in 2013. In Karnataka, the weaker sections of society firmly stood by the Congress in the 2013 Assembly elections since they were frustrated with the Hindutva agenda of the BJP and Gujarat model of development.

The five years of Saffron Rule in Karnataka (2008-2013) chronicles the numerous misdeeds of the BJP government. The BJP's relentless effort to secure an institutional base for its Hindutva ideology continues to vitiate the cultural life in the State. The party also freely used government machinery to further its ideological goals. The Lok Ayukta report on illegal mining in the State shows how the state colluded to set aside its own laws and regulations for the benefit of BJP Ministers and private companies to loot natural resources. The increasing number of right wing ideologues in the State's media regulatory committees and juries has also meant a lack of creative freedom for artists who depend on state patronage (Gowda, 2014:03). There is need for checking the communal politics and 'state criminality' strengthened by the right wing politics in Karnataka.

### Comparative Analysis

Sl. No.	Elections	Number of Constituency	Congress (%)	BJS/BJP (%)	Leftists / Regional Parties (%)	Others (%)
1.	1951	80	46.35	2.26	35.43	15.94
2.	1957	179	52.08	1.34	44.72	1.86
3.	1962	208	50.22	2.29	33.67	13.82
4.	1967	216	48.43	2.82	38.86	9.89
5.	1972	216	52.1	4.3	41.09	2.51

6.	1978	224	44.25	3.4	47.95	4.40
7.	1983	224	40.42	7.93	44.47	7.18
8.	1985	224	40.82	3.88	54.09	1.21
9.	1989	224	43.76	4.14	36.33	15.77
10.	1994	224	26.95	16.99	43.92	12.14
11.	1999	224	40.84	20.69	22.92	15.55
12.	2004	224	35.27	28.33	28.04	8.36
13.	2008	224	34.76	33.86	26.23	5.15
14.	2013	224	36.55	19.97	20.47	23.01

Source: Economic and Political Weekly, ISSN (Online) – 2349-8846.

The data revealed that Congress, regional parties, leftists and independents have gained greater percentage of votes during 1951-2013. The regional parties have gained more percentage of votes as compared to Bharatiya Jana Sangha and Bharatiya Janata Party which represent the rightist political parties. The independent candidates have also made their presence felt politically in Karnataka state. The BJP has consistently improved its electoral performance during 1994-2013 according to the above statistics. The Congress Party has not compromised with the politics of social justice since independence. The voters have considered Congress Party as a ruling party in the state since there was no credible alternative. The voters have brushed aside the communal agenda of BJP over a period of time.

Karnataka's political future will hinge on how the BJP and Congress deal with factionalism. The BJP, which had lost heavily when Mr. Yeddyurappa broke away from the party before the last Assembly election, did well on his return in the Lok Sabha election in 2014. Karnataka was in power in the state since May 2013 under the Chief Ministership of Siddaramaiah. The BJP has gained politically but lost ideologically and constitutionally.

The simmering rivalry in the BJP between B.S.Yeddyurappa, State President and K.S.Eswarappa, leader of the opposition in the Legislative Council has become a thorn in the throat of BJP. The national leaders are highly perturbed over the recent developments which have adversely affected the political prospects of the party. The infighting within the BJP is indeed a conflict within two factions of right wing political party in Karnataka. The Hindu nationalists and right wing activists have actively used the social media to develop their network and promote right wing politics in Karnataka state (Moudgal, 2017:06).

## Summary

The National Democratic Alliance has come to power under the leadership of Narendra Modi with the overwhelming support of Hindutva forces and other communities. The people were sick of the UPA government which failed to live upto their expectations in the fulfillment of constitutional obligations and aspirations of the voters. The liberal and democratic forces have critically analyzed series of threats posed by NDA government through demonetization, Goods and Services Tax, cow vigilantism, moral policing, atrocities on Dalits, minorities and women and other oppressive features. The intellectuals and activists have called upon the liberal and democratic forces to putforth united struggle against social and economic inequities and injustices.

Historically, Coastal Karnataka has been the meeting ground of various religions, languages and socio-cultural interactions. Dakshina Kannada and Udupi are the constituent parts of the larger Coastal Karnataka region. The rise of rightist political ideology and force in Coastal Karnataka region has attracted the attention of political thinkers and activists. The destruction of feudal structure and opening of the economy to the larger market have contributed for the growth of Hindutva forces in the region. The Coastal Karnataka region also witnessed serious crisis in terms of advocating the kind of socio-cultural, religious and civic values to the rest of the world.

Coastal Karnataka is often referred to as the 'laboratory of Hindutva'. The Emergency (1975-77) had a severe impact on Coastal Karnataka. A section of the upper castes was also consolidating against the Congress in the 1980s. The 1990s was a decade where Hindutva was marketed in these two districts. The rise of religious fundamentalism and communal facism has gone hand in hand in coastal Karnataka. The steady growth of Hindutva in coastal Karnataka has been accompanied by intense communal polarisation.

The following observation made by Sitaram Yechury, General Secretary, Communist Party of India (Marxist) serves as a reminder to the progressive forces to restore peace, harmony and tranquility in the country. It reads: "The country has seen the worst vote bank politics by a Union Government. Karnataka should take the lead in forming a mighty people's movement against the divisive politics of the BJP of dividing people on communal lines". The history of communalism needs to be written with a human touch in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts since the fundamentalists are suffering from the medieval mindset as far as communal relations are concerned. The people of Coastal Karnataka have a great social responsibility and political

obligation of preventing the marginality of the weaker sections of society by developing meaningful and powerful social and political alliance for pursuing emancipatory and empowerment centered politics in the new millennium.

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