

## THE PERSISTING EFFECT OF CASTE ON LEGISLATIVE POLITICS IN KARNATAKA: A LEGAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL ACCOUNT

**AUTHOR** – DAIK PRAJWAL G, STUDENT AT CHRIST DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY, BANGALORE

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### Abstract

This paper takes a close look at the deep and persistent effect of caste on legislative politics in the state of Karnataka. It moves away from the simplistic idea of “vote-bank” and discusses how caste has been a primary form of political mobilization and candidate selection and also a basis for framing policies. The paper presents the historical hegemony of, and changing loyalties between, major caste factions, notably: Lingayats and Vokkaligas, the strategic alliance of groups such as the AHINDA and the controversial involvement of religious institution (*mathas*) in elections. The electoral data of the significant constituencies of Shiggaon and Hassan is utilized, which ensures evidence that shows that national parties employ pragmatic measures, circumventing the formal legal boundaries of a secular democracy for social engineering. Finally, the paper analyzes the legal and constitutive principles for electoral governance, with a particular focus on the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and pivotal judicial decisions, concluding with a summary of findings and recommendations to promote democratic and equitable representation in the state.

### Keywords

Caste, Karnataka, Legislative Politics, Lingayats, Vokkaligas, AHINDA, Social Engineering, Political Mobilization, Representation of the People Act, Electoral Law, *Mathas*.

### I. Chapter I: Introduction

#### A. The Paradox of Caste within Indian Democracy

India’s political environment has a central paradox, a constitutional democracy aspiring for secularism, and to eliminate caste-based discrimination, on the other hand, caste is one of the key organizing principles of political and social life.<sup>34</sup> Though the Indian Constitution theoretically guarantees equality, and forbids discrimination based on caste, Article 14 and Article 15<sup>35</sup>, the political environment, especially at the state and local levels operates under a

very different and more complex set of rules.<sup>36</sup> This disconnection between constitutional principles and political practice is not just incidental, it is part of the DNA of India’s democratic experience.<sup>3</sup> The state level produces local identities, historical hierarchies, and community loyalties that operate at their highest values which makes it a lively, and at sometimes contentious, political laboratory for experimentation.<sup>1</sup>

Karnataka as a state represents a particularly excellent example of political testing.<sup>1</sup> Its political architecture is characterized by caste solidarity, class interests, and evolving

<sup>34</sup> SANA Z. AHMED, REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN KARNATAKA: ANALYZING THE ROLE OF CASTE, *INT’L J. MGMT. & SOC. SCI. RSCH. REV.* (2022).

<sup>35</sup> Madhav Khosla, *Caste Formalism*, 42 *S. ASIA RSCH.* 398 (2022).

<sup>36</sup> Thad Dunning & Janhavi Nilekani, *Ethnic Quotas and Political Mobilization: Caste, Parties, and Distribution in Indian Village Councils*, *AM. POL. SCI. REV.* (2011).

ideologies. The political competition between the major parties—specifically, the Indian National Congress (INC), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S))—is primarily exercise at the strategic level of galvanizing and coalescing support for different caste constituencies.<sup>37</sup> This report will attempt to go past an oversimplification of caste as a “vote-bank” and provide a much more nuanced, academic assessment of the caste’s multiplicity and enduring legacy in Karnataka’s legislative politics. By tracing out the historical pathways, the present day strategies, and the legal aspects, this paper will offer readers a multidimensional view of how caste plays a role in the governance of the state and electoral processes.

### B. Historical Pathways of Caste and Political Power in Karnataka

The landscape of politics in Karnataka today is an extension of a history of political and social evolution in the aftermath of independence and the later 1956 linguistic reorganization of states.<sup>38</sup> Building the foundations post-statehood, Karnataka politics was dominated by the Indian National Congress Party, which was adept at holding a tenuous balance between the two most prominent land owning castes, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas.<sup>4</sup> During this time, this stability lasted, and the Congress, led by Congress leaders of the dominant groups, had a rooted hegemonic community.<sup>3</sup>

A watershed moment occurred in the 1970s when Chief Minister D. Devaraj Urs, who consciously attempted to break the dominance of power from the Lingayats and Vokkaligas.<sup>3</sup> Urs devised a political configuration of a coalition of oppressed groups that he labeled AHINDA. AHINDA, a Kannada acronym for: *Alpasankhyataru* (minorities), *Hindulidavaru* (backward classes), and *Dalitaru* (Dalits).<sup>3</sup> This realigned the politics of Karnataka based on political empowerment and social advantage for groups that have been historically

disadvantaged in the state, disrupted the long-standing political power structures, and the Congress mounted record electoral power. The significance of the AHINDA configuration signals a movement away from caste patronage domination to a assemblage of common social coalition, and that legacy continues to retain its clout in the state today.

The 1990s brought forth another historical lens for political situation on the state with the emergence of the Hindutva ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Again, the rise of the BJP was not only a political ideology shift but also an intentional educational ground swell support from the Lingayat community significant *mathas* and religious institutions. This ideological and social engineering has allowed the BJP to, both politically and electorally, break Congress and Janata Dal displacing their longstanding dominance to consolidate the political party mechanism in the state. From a historical standpoint, caste in Karnataka is highly contested and malleable such that Tropes of alliances and ideological discourses ebb and flow to produce electoral results.

### C. Understanding the Political Developments of Contemporary Karnataka

The state of Karnataka typically has three dominant parties represented—Congress (INC), BJP, and Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S)).<sup>3</sup> In the most recent Legislative Assembly elections 2023, INC gained a historic majority of seats; more importantly it consolidated winning 135 out of the 224 seats and 42.88% of the vote share, the INC gain was the largest in the state since 1989 election.<sup>39</sup> All of this was done at the expense of BJP, whose cadre and party lost seats from 104 to 66 and decreased their vote share to a notable 36%. JD(S) looked much stable collapse, when their vote share and seat diminished so minimal that they emerged as a political party in the local election.

<sup>37</sup> M.P. JAIN, *INDIAN CONSTITUTIONAL LAW* (3rd ed. 1978).

<sup>38</sup> S. Shastri, *Twilight of Congress Hegemony: Emergence of Bi-Polar Alliance System in Karnataka*, *ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY* (1999).

<sup>39</sup> *Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action v. Union of India*, (1996) 3 SCC 212.

The 2023 election outcomes point to at least one dynamic of importance: the recasting of vote outcome and successful mobilization of counter hegemonic coalition.<sup>40</sup> The BJP centers of power in North and Coastal Karnataka... stayed the same with the BJP continuing to wield most the same type of dominant power.<sup>41</sup> INC, semi and largely, placed some amount of power into its re-imagined AHINDA makeup—formed through embracing ideology for mobilizing caste oppressed groups, disrupt the dominant caste that dominated historically to alternate political power. This JD(S) collapse represents another dividing of caste, where INC and BJP to capture votes from the JD(S) core Vokkaliga base. This frame work leads into the larger realm of the few other social engineering and religious businesses that contributed to the outcomes we presented in 2023.

## II. Chapter 2: Literature Review

### A. Theoretical frameworks of Caste and identity

Social science research on caste dominance in Indian politics has shifted from the standpoint of caste as traditional, primordial, identity to a construction that is fluid and politically contextual.<sup>1</sup> Assuming a standing in this tradition, the notion of 'dominant castes' emerges as a key construct. A dominant caste is defined not only by population size, but by land control (own/cultivate), economic power, and the capability to convert socio-economic might into political power.<sup>9</sup> In Karnataka, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas functioned as dominant castes, often exerting unequal power ratio excess over others, being able to influence election outcomes, and policy directions.<sup>1</sup>

The conceptualization of "social engineering" is the primary mental model used to understand how political parties do navigate this contextual land.<sup>7</sup> Social engineering is defined as the purposeful and systematic design of political parties to create electorally successful social

coalitions through combining and appealing to a diverse set of caste groups and caste sub-groups.<sup>7</sup> Political actors addressed this, by aligning or selecting candidates from the dominant caste group in a constituency, establishing welfare policies for specific communities, and building coalitional structures such as caste associations and religious institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Such strategies have been seriously examined, and formal constitutional provisions have been unexamined in empirical studies.<sup>18</sup> With the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution, which established a three-tier local government (*panchayats*) system, and also laid the groundwork for random reservations for historically disadvantaged communities, it is highly opportune to assess the implications of quotas.<sup>20</sup> Researchers in states such as Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Bihar investigated the implications of the quotas for presidents of village councils; and while the quotas are intended to redress the inequalities, their distributional efficacy at the street level can be quite poor.<sup>18</sup> A case in point: simple having a leader from the oppressed caste does not guarantee better policies, or allocation of resources, for their community, a major indicator of structural and political issues.<sup>18</sup>

### B. A Historical Survey of Political mobilization

Karnataka's political mobilization history is a history of twisting allegiances and feints based on caste. After independence of course, the Congress monopoly was via a Brahman-Vokkaliga coalition, which was disrupted by Janata Party and other regional parties.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, the political context changed completely under D. Devaraj Urs. Urs as Chief Minister proposed new political recipes, forging a strong coalition of economically oppressed caste-section and with past losers of negative privileges (OBC, SC, ST, as well as minorities). Within the development party chorus, this gave rise to the partisan beliefs as AHINDA, which produced strong election rolls for Congress in 1972 and 1978 and the kind of changes in

<sup>40</sup> In re, Gas Leak at LG Polymers Chemical Plant, 2020 SCC OnLine NGT 129 (Jan. 6, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, (1997) 2 SCC 353.

relevant political locales to produce a far more equitable distribution of material and political arrangements, especially the number of OBCs in the legislature. The perceived rationale generated a political inheritance that observed neither this party, nor certainly the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) would think they could inherit.

The limits of the Janata party formed, in the early 1980s, a more tame political turf for power struggle between the Lingayat and Vokkaliga powers. The Lingayat set the void patrimonial leadership through leaders such as S.R. Bommai and H.D. Deve Gowda, which caused the Janata Party's death, and opened up space for the Congress party. The 1990s and beyond coincided with the ideological and political rise of the BJP, which at the same time situated its Concrete power within the Ayodhya movement and contemporaneously localized its power within Lingayat religious manufactures.<sup>42</sup> In essence, the BJP recreated ground in South India, and was a stronger challenger to Congress and JD(S), the two leading parties.<sup>3</sup> The burgeoning political fluidity in Karnataka appreciates the on-going and participatory relationship between caste identity and ideological stories through organized fawning to mobilization, for great political change in the political field depended on re-organization of coalitional caste bases.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Chapter 3: Scheme of Study

#### A. Research Questions

This study grew from a number of questions, providing questions for a rich analysis of caste and Karnataka's legislative politics. The research questions come as:

1. How do political parties in Karnataka utilize caste as a tool strategically in selecting candidates and campaign?
2. What is the specific political influence of the Lingayat and Vokkaliga *mathas* (monastic) on elections?

3. How did the AHINDA strategy advance the INC's electoral victory in 2023?
4. What is the legal and constitutional implication of the ongoing caste census controversy and perceptions of communities?
5. How do constituency-level caste politics, observed in Shiggaon and Hassan, reflect and contribute to larger state-level politics?

#### B. Research Methodology

This paper employs a doctrinal and analytical methodology to address the research questions. The initial paradigmatic portion of the study is a doctrinal legal analysis of the legal and constitutional framework that language guarantees our politics in India. For example, this includes examining relevant constitutional provisions, including Right to Equality (Articles 14 and 15), provisions guaranteeing universal suffrage (Articles 325 and 326), and the arrangement of castebased representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes through reservations (Articles 330, 332, 341, and 342).<sup>43</sup> The analysis involves the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and examines Section 123 of the Act, which defines "corrupt practices" as "the use of caste" appeals.<sup>44</sup> This exercise of the legal frame is paramount in laying the first formal, statutory limits that political practice follows.

In addition to the legal analysis, an empirical and qualitative interpretation of on-ground socio-political dynamics is undertaken. Relying on a range of secondary sources, including scholarly articles, research papers, and extensive journalistic sources.<sup>9</sup> The study employs the most recent electoral data from the 2018 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election and 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election as quantitative underpinning to their analysis.<sup>6</sup> The study focuses on two MLA

<sup>42</sup> Sana Z. Ahmed, *Regional Political Parties in Karnataka: Analyzing the Role of Caste*, INT'L J. MGMT. & SOC. SCI. RSCH. REV. (2022).

<sup>43</sup> Thad Dunning & Janhavi Nilekani, *Ethnic Quotas and Political Mobilization: Caste, Parties, and Distribution in Indian Village Councils* (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 729, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> THE INDIAN INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN SETTLEMENTS, CLIMATE FINANCE IN INDIA 2023 (2023).

constituencies, Shiggaon and Hassan, to provide a constituency-level, discrete analysis as to how caste dynamics play out in practice.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the methodology serves as a bridge between legal doctrines and political realities, to inform a complete and nuanced understanding of a challenging issue demonstrating how laws and constitutional principles are interpreted, applied, and at times subverted in the pursuit of electoral advantage.

#### IV. Chapter 4: Caste as the Centers of the Electoral Strategy

##### A. Dominant Caste Hegemony—Lingayat and Vokkaliga

The political milieu of Karnataka cannot be separated from the forces of its two most dominant castes: Lingayat and Vokkaliga. Being two of the more dense population groups which have owned land and have engaged politically in a concerted fashion has shaped the future of Karnataka politically.

##### Lingayat

The Lingayat community which is approximately 15-17% of the population in the Karnataka has no choice but to include with their northern and central districts populations.<sup>46</sup> The Lingayat political support has oscillated over the past decades. Initially a reliable support base for the Indian National Congress, the community transitioned towards the BJP based on regional Lingayat leaders such as B.S. Yediyurappa and others. This transition established the Lingayat community as the “backbone of the BJP” in the state, as they have been important to the party’s political success in its southern political laboratory.

A special characteristic about the political leverage of the Lingayat community is its religious institutions – or *mathas* (monastic institutions).<sup>47</sup> The *mathas* have continued to be more than just religious institutions, they

operate as strong socio-political institutions that provide education, financial backing, and social services that lock in community fidelity and increase political strength.

*Matha* endorsements by political parties are in high demand and are quite influential for political alliances making them an important player in state elections.<sup>29</sup> Political leaders from every party including Prime minister Narendra Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi regularly visit *mathas* to gain blessings and communicate a message of respect to community leaders that are widely documented by the media and illustrates caste loyalty.

##### Vokkaligas

The Vokkaliga community in the “Old Mysore region” of Southern Karnataka– covering the districts Mandya, Mysuru, and Hassan are historically aligned to the Janata Dal (Secular) and the Congress. The JD(S) has formed fully formed its political identity around this community by leveraging the H.D. Deve Gowda Prime Ministership. Deve Gowda being viewed as the “uncrowned head of the Vokkaligas”. Similarly to the Lingayats, the Vokkaliga community also has a significant religious center, the Adichunchanagiri Matha, which acts as a nerve center for Vokkaliga politics.<sup>13</sup> Political actors from all major parties routinely visit the institution to seek blessings from the pontiff, Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Dr. Nirmalanandanatha Mahaswamiji, a clear indication of its immense social and political reach. The political contest in the Vokkaliga heartland is determined by what is primarily a face off between the JD(S) and Congress parties, with the BJP contestants sometimes any to capitalize by tapping into Vokkaliga sentiments and local leaders.

##### B. The AHINDA Coalition: A New Form of Politics

The political story in Karnataka is not just a story about two dominant castes, but it is also a story of counter-hegemonic political formations. The AHINDA coalition, which stands for minorities, backward classes and Dalits, represents a

<sup>45</sup> Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah Announces Fresh Digital Caste Census, THE LOGICAL INDIAN (Sep. 22, 2025).

<sup>46</sup> The Hindu, “Karnataka caste census,” (Sep. 19, 2025).

<sup>47</sup> The Representation of the People Act, 1951, Acts of Parliament, 1951 (India).

strategic and powerful political formation, which can be ascribed to CM Siddaramaiah.<sup>7</sup> The AHINDA strategy is a direct extension of D. Devaraj Urs, who first empowered these marginalized communities in the 1970s and reconfigured the power dynamics of the state.

The renewed emphasis on the AHINDA coalition was one of the reasons that contributed to the Indian National Congress' (INC) landslide win in the 2023 Legislative Assembly elections.<sup>7</sup> While the BJP continued to have a Lingayat voting base in the 2023 elections, the INC consolidated Dalit, minority, and backward classes' votes in a way that provided a counter-force and was electorally viable.<sup>4</sup> This situation outlines the notion that political patterns are not totally new, but rather cyclical about power and inclusion. AHINDA as a format may potentially teach us that these separation points remain important and are able to be mobilized, and the powerful caste narrative is disrupted. The BJP's loss in 2023, despite its solidly Lingayat voting base, suggests that this cohort is now electorally viable as a counter force, creating a lasting change in the political balance. The struggle for equal rights and representation of marginalized groups is not an abstract notion but rather a tangible political reality, seen in situations where the INC promised reservations as part of its welfare and social justice policies.

### **C. The Caste Census Controversy: Political Ramifications and Forward-Looking Outcomes**

Karnataka's most recent and heated political flashpoint has been the welfare and educational survey commonly referred to as the "caste census". While supporters such as Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and AHINDA have stated that the caste census is a pivotal measure for evidence-based policy and social justice, it has received major backlash and resistance from dominant caste groups and the BJP.<sup>16</sup> The official line of the state government is that the caste census will provide statistical justification

for new welfare and reservations policies for serving disenfranchised sectors of society.<sup>48</sup>

Conversely, opponents have condemned the measures vehemently, calling it a "blatant and sinister attempt to divide Hindu society" and a "dangerous social experiment" that would create new vote banks.<sup>49</sup> The controversy heightened with criticisms that Hindu-Christian caste names were included in the draft list for the caste census such as "Kuruba Christian" and "Vokkaliga Christian". Opponents assert that this is an attempt to insert Christian converts into Hindu caste groups, and that once established, these groups could avail of benefits that were intended for disadvantaged Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist beneficiaries.<sup>16</sup>

The controversy underscores the anxiety that dominant castes feel about a change in the political power structure, or the effects of a more accurate count.<sup>50</sup> Leaders of the Lingayat and Vokkaliga castes signify deep trepidation about what the eventual outcomes of the census provide, with one leader for example explicitly expressing fear that this count would demonstrate their numbers were far weaker than their perceived political power. Any relationship between their historical claim to disproportionate political is diminished, as is their collective bargaining power. The anxiety over "Christianized" caste categories is less to do with a theological issue over religious conversion, than it is to simply erode their political leverage as a large, homogenous caste group, reduced instead into tiny sub-groups that are less politically viable.<sup>16</sup> The potential impact on the structural political landscape would be to political advantage to the numerically larger, but historically more fractional disadvantaged OBC and Dalit castes. The overt reaction by elements of the BJP, labeling the census "anti-Hindu" based, and politically motivated Act, serves a political strategy against the larger grouping of disadvantaged caste.

<sup>48</sup> [Shiggaon Assembly constituency, WIKIPEDIA](#)

<sup>49</sup> [Politics of Karnataka, WIKIPEDIA](#)

<sup>50</sup> [2018 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election, WIKIPEDIA](#)

## V. Chapter 5: Candidate Selection and Constituency-Level Analysis

### A. Empirical Social Engineering

The complex math of caste politics often comes into clearest focus through the caste-based calculations of candidate selection, as parties engage in “empirical social engineering” at the constituency-level in order to maximize their chances for winning. Rather than focus on candidate qualifications for success in the office, candidates were selected based on an evaluation of caste composition in the constituency and the electoral need to attract the dominant voting groups. Evidence from the 2023 election showed that 45% of ALL candidates nominated by INC, BJP, and JD(S) were Vokkaliga or Lingayat, which is well beyond their 12% and 16% respective populations. The BJP, like 2022, nominated the most Lingayat candidates, while the JD(S) is focused on a Vokkaliga base energized by the Deve Gowda family.<sup>51</sup>

The tactical approach is likewise applied to sub-caste connection. The BJP has consolidated a stronghold among the Panchamshali Lingayats, a numerically large sect, even shifting some political gears by way of increasing their quota, in order to please the cohort, and then retaining them as a support group. Congress does this as well, allowing individuals from other sub-sects, such as Laxman Savadi of the Ganigas, tickets strategically as they attempt to gain access to important vote banks among the overall Lingayat population. The electoral contest in Karnataka is ultimately not between parties but a calculated, extreme local competition between duplicitous caste and sub-caste arrangements, and is indicative of how social engineering is neither prevalent nor accidental in Indian electoral politics.

<sup>51</sup> The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1951, Acts of Parliament, 1951 (India).

## B. Case Study: Shiggaon and Hassan Cases

An exclusive examination of the individual MLA candidates illustrate how caste manifests politically.<sup>27</sup> Shiggaon and Hassan constituencies represent advantageous case studies for the Lingayat and Vokkaliga political bastions, respectively.

### Case Study 1: Shiggaon Constituency (Lingayat Heartland)

Shiggaon situated in the Haveri district of Karnataka occupies a significant Lingayat constituency, and is a traditional BJP stronghold.<sup>13</sup> In the 2023 Legislative Assembly election, Bommai won the seat with 54.95% of the vote, comfortably defeating his opponent from the INC. This result sustained the BJP's grip on North Karnataka and continued to suggest the Lingayat community's strong personal and party loyalty to its leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, political fortunes in Shiggaon are not fixed. In a 2024 follow-up by-election, the INC candidate Yasir Ahmed Khan Pathan beat Bharat Bommai, son of Basavaraj Bommai by a margin of over 13,000 votes. This isolated event certainly indicates nothing; however, it could – if nothing else – serve as a symbolic sign of a future trend away from the BJP's traditional base, or simply a protest vote against the party's central leadership, which demonstrates that, even in a caste fortress, the loyalty is not built-in and needs care.<sup>52</sup>

### Case study 2: Hassan constituency (Vokkaliga fortress)

Hassan, Constituency No. 196, is a pivotal Vokkaliga fortress and the constituency of the Janata Dal (Secular) kingpin H.D. Deve Gowda, and his family.<sup>6</sup> In the 2018 election, however, also recorded the BJP's first victory, by Preetham J. Gowda, the BJP defeated H.S. Prakash, marking a significant leak in the Janata Dal (Secular) bastion.<sup>27</sup> Many considered this a high point for the BJP's social structure-ing in Vokkaliga territory.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Caste census, *ECONOMIC TIMES* (Oct. 21, 2025).

In 2023, there was a reversal of fortune. Swaroop Prakash JD(S) candidate and son of H.S. Prakash, again defeated incumbent MLA from BJP.<sup>27</sup> With a vote share of 49.80%, the Vokkaliga caste and family loyalty to JD(S) and family are as powerful as ever.<sup>27</sup> Overall examinations of the electoral oscillations in Hassan is indicative of the limits of BJP's social structure-ing in an area dominated by caste and family loyalties and substantiates the continued plans of JD(S) as a regional party depicting caste.<sup>31</sup>

The following table summarizes the election data for these two constituencies allowing for such analyses to be supported quantitatively with the results.

Constituency	Election Year	Winning Party	Winning Candidate	Vote Share (%)	Vote Margin
Shiggaon	2023	BJP	Basavaraj Bommai	54.95%	35,978
Shiggaon	2024 (By-election)	INC	Yasir Ahmed Khan Pathan	52.41%	13,448
Hassan	2018	BJP	Preetham J. Gowda	41.02%	13,006
Hassan	2023	JD(S)	Swaroop Prakash	49.80%	7,854

## VI. Chapter 6 - Constitutional and Legal Framework of Caste in Politics

### A. Constitutional Provisions and Electoral Laws

The Indian Constitution provides form and substance for a democratic and secular republic, which in principle averts the political exploitation of caste.<sup>53</sup> The substance of this structure is the provision of equality in Articles 14 and 15, which prohibits the State from discriminating against members of historically disadvantaged communities on the grounds of religion, race, caste or some other basis.<sup>2</sup> The principle of universal adult franchise (Article 326), and the requirement for one electoral roll (Article 325) suggests that caste is not considered basis for voting nor for entry to the vote. Ironically, the Constitution legitimates caste for the end of securing the representation of communities that were historically oppressed.<sup>5</sup> Articles 330 and 332 prescribe reservations for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, respectively, and they ensure representation.<sup>54</sup> Similarly the President functions caprice, under Article 341 to declare a caste as SC or under Article 341 to declare a caste or community as ST.<sup>22</sup> This creates a tension, legal, for wanting to abolish discrimination on the basis of caste, while framing caste in law for the purposes of remediation of historic oppression by providing for their representation.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the Constitution, the Representation of People Act of 1951 provides legislative base for the regulation of electoral activities.<sup>23</sup> "Corrupt practices," as defined in Section 123 of the Act, refers to explicit requests for votes on the basis of the candidate or voter's religion, race, caste, or community.<sup>11</sup> This is a measure against sectarianism and divisive campaign language, too, as it attempts to preserve the secular character of the electoral process. The interpretation and application of the clause has been the subject of considerable interest both legally and

<sup>53</sup> James Manor, *Pragmatic Progressives in Regional Politics: The Case of Devraj Urs*, *ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY* (1980).

<sup>54</sup> BJP's vote share increased in all regions, *THE HANS INDIA* (May 13, 2023).

politically, given that party campaigns typically apply sophisticated social engineering that dances around prohibitive clause, relying on generalized caste appeals yet still mobilizes voters through caste based means.

### B. Judicial Reactivity and Its Ramifications

Judicial bodies have greatly influenced the legal boundaries around caste and politics as eluded to above with cases attempting to distill and recognize the intention of the law.<sup>55</sup> The most notable of this is the Supreme Court of India's seven-member Constitution Bench decision(s) in *Abhiram Singh v. C.D. Commachen* (2017)<sup>56</sup> This case relied on parsing of the pronoun "his" in the of RPA 1951, Sect. 123(3). In a 4-3 decision with a majority opinion, the court ruled that a candidate's appeal to the voters of "his" religion, race, caste, community, or language is a corrupt practice. The court took a very broad, purposive view of "his" to mean, not just the candidate, but the religion, race, or caste of the voter, election agent, or any other individual with the candidate's permission or knowledge.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of the judgment was to foster the secular nature of the electoral process by removing all sectarian appeals.<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, the dissenting opinion highlighted that this purposeful interpretation would "reduce democracy to an abstraction" because candidates could not respond to the authentic injustices or grievances of communities formed by those identities.<sup>23</sup> This ideological divide in the judiciary demonstrates the pervasive strain between a legal system trying to institute a blind, neutral electoral process and the socio-political realities where caste-based injustices are at the heart of political discourse.<sup>23</sup> The Supreme Court has intervened to protect the democratic participation of disenfranchised communities in 2025.

*Kiran vs Rajkumar Jivaraj Jain (SC)*, in upholding the legislative intent of SC/ST Act,

<sup>55</sup> The Hans India, "BJP's vote share increased in all regions," (May 13, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> *Abhiram Singh v. C.D. Commachen*, 2017 (2) SCC 1.

1989 and providing protection to a Dalit victim of electoral retaliation.<sup>42</sup> These judicial interventions have been meaningful yet still continued to struggle with regulating an electoral reality that includes caste is firmly entrenched within the political behavior.<sup>23</sup>

## VII. Chapter 7: Conclusion and Suggestions

### A. Summary of Findings

This analysis has shown caste is not an antiquated part of Karnataka's legislative politics but a persistent and proactive determinant.<sup>57</sup> In spite of there being a powerful legal and constitutional framework to promote a secular democracy and system of egalitarianism, the practice of politics at ground level is fundamentally rooted in caste mobilization and social engineering. The state's electoral history- it is a story of caste coalitions, eventual realigning of caste coalitions, and forms of caste-based linkages.

Prevailing political hegemony exercised by the Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities, exerted through a potent mix of community numerical strength, moral economic power, and the political influence of major religious institutions and temples for certain sects, sustained a major source of the material and capital bases of political power.<sup>58</sup> The traditional hegemony of these communities is increasingly challenged by counter-hegemonic political movements. The Congress Party's re-invocation of its historically successful AHINDA political mobilization of SCs, STs, and minorities was a significant re-aligning of political power and a continuation of the struggles of historical social justice movements. The evident current hierarchical controversy over caste census revealing a serious concern for caste not resembling the historical sense of power and unraveling the status change of previously hegemonic castes. Lastly, a constituency-level case examination, in the contrasting context of

<sup>57</sup> Thad Dunning & Janhavi Nilekani, *Ethnic Quotas and Political Mobilization: Caste, Parties, and Distribution in Indian Village Councils*, *AM. POL. SCI. REV.* (2011).

<sup>58</sup> Lingayat Boratti, *Lingayat Assertions of Identity in Colonial Karnataka: Caste, Census, and Politics of Representation*, 42 *S. ASIA RSCH.* 398 (2022).

Shiggions and Hassan, affords insights into the trajectory of political successes selective candidate pick- being a political pathway determined by accurate perception of complex caste dynamics.<sup>12</sup>

### B. Recommendations for Policy and Legal Reform

The following recommendations for policy and legal reform are meant to address the continuing relevance of caste in legislative politics:

#### Re-evaluate the Legal Framework of Indian Law:

The legal framework should be re-evaluated and revised, particularly with regard to the section prohibiting appeals of hatred or any prejudice, Section 123 of Representation of People Act, 1951, protecting legitimate political expressions house basis of caste-related injustices. A significant revised legal framework of caution and neutrality lines, should furnish slightly clearer understand of what constitutes corrupt practice regarding candidates and politicians advancing legitimate concerns of under-privileged constituents based on their histories and current historical grievances.

#### Strengthening Independence of Institutions:

The Election Commission of India and State Pollution Control Boards should be endowed with greater independence, resources, and punishment authority, to help the EE reconcile electoral law based on political freedom or economic exploitation. The independence of each of the institutional mechanisms that enable regulation of elections and the function of public expenditures should contend with political influence, especially not as funds sources from political campaigns.

#### Fostering Political Integrity Beyond Reservation Improvements:

While the constitutionally mandated reservation system of SCs and STs is essential and indispensable to socio-economic inclusion, policies must encourage political representation of backward classes and other community minorities of representation of each political party. This can enable political representation of backward

classes and minorities beyond- reservations in the political party system- more emphasis, for leadership selection of backward classes and occupational minorities. Additionally, encourage developing a less caste-centric political culture, governance of village or community development based individual issues not as development culture, should communities advance towards represent of their socialist or societal ideals of civic so is not integrated or reflected equally in the political party framework scope of the government regardless of delays in the process of political representation- point nearer towards the proper ideal of equality for all individuals defined by the constitution.

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