India's
2019
Elections

The Hindutva Wave and
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Chapter 16

Karnataka
BJP's Spectacular Victory over
the Congress and JD(S)

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Elections as the defining institutions of democracy have always been a major focus of attention for political theorists, analysts, journalists and practising politicians.[1] They are an important part of procedural democracy with implications for substantive issues in democratic politics. Election manifestos and electoral politics contribute to the articulation, interest and aspirations of people in public policy formulation and good governance.

The Congress Party and the Janata Dal (Secular) or JD(S) were rivals in Karnataka, especially in former old Mysore, but came together to form a hasty alliance following the results of the 2018 assembly election primarily for sharing power. Its performance was not satisfactory for various sections of the society, nor was the government stable during the entire period of the coalition in Karnataka and the overall development activities were not effective. Lack of clarity about its loan waver scheme disappointed a large number of farmers. These problems aggravated after Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) spectacular victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. Dissent in both the Congress and JD(S) began to grow. This resulted in the resignation of 17 MLAs, fall of the

coalition government and replacement by the BJP government under the leadership of B. S. Yeddyurappa.

People have high expectations from the BJP government, but some ministerial aspirants complain about not being inducted into the ministry—reflecting some apprehensions about the BJP government's stability. The overarching influence of the strong BJP government at the centre, supplemented by an equally strong contingent of the state BJP MPs, is likely to overcome these apprehensions. With this brief background, it is important to analyse results of 2019 Lok Sabha election in Karnataka.

Surprises and unexpected electoral outcomes stimulate exploration of the causes and reasons for victory and defeat. Many political experts and politicians themselves belonging to the BJP were surprised about BJP's huge victory in winning 25 of 28 seats from Karnataka. Understanding the state level electoral base and related issues becomes pertinent and relevant due to diversities in terms of religion, caste, language and performance of parties from the viewpoint of development.

OUTCOME OF THE 2019 ELECTIONS

The BJP clearly dominated as the Congress and JD (S) managed to win one seat each and one seat was won by an independent candidate. The BJP swept to victory in Mumbai Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, Central Karnataka and Coastal Karnataka regions. 'Modi's appeal has also cut across caste and creed lines since the party managed to win all the seven reserved constituencies—including five scheduled caste (SC) and two scheduled tribe (ST) seats, some of them considered to be the stronghold of the Congress.'[2] Former Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda, senior Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge, former Chief Minister and former Union Minister Veerappa Moily and other prominent leaders suffered humiliating defeats. Overall, it was shocking for both the JD(S) and Congress.

BJP's victory was spectacular not only in the number of seats won but also in its high vote share[3]; it won 51.38 per cent of votes in the 2019 elections (see Table 16.1). 'In electoral terms, a vote share of this

Table 16.1 *Vote Share in Percentage*

Year	INC	BJP	JD(S)
1999	45.40	27.20	10.90
2004	36.80	34.80	20.40
2009	37.60	41.60	13.60
2014	40.80	43.01	10.97
2019	31.88	51.38	9.67

Source: Special Correspondent, 'Congress-JD (S) Coalition Decimated as BJP Sweeps Karnataka', The Hindu, 24 May 2019; Election Commission of India, 'General Election to Lok Sabha Trends and Result 2019'. Available at http://results.eci.gov.in/pc/en/partywise/partywiseresult-S10.htm?st=S10 (accessed on 30 September 2019).

magnitude has been unprecedented for any non–Congress party in Karnataka. The Congress managed such a spectacular win in 1984, in the election held following the assassination of Indira Gandhi.'[4] In the 2014 elections, both the Congress and JD(S) had managed moderate representation from the state,[5] but in this election they did not even retain the electoral success they had achieved. 'If the 2014 Lok Sabha elections were marked by anti–incumbency, pro–incumbency was the keynote of the 2019 elections as BJP decimated the opposition.'[6]

The politics of seat sharing between the Congress and the JD(S) substantially benefited the BJP in Karnataka as the result of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections demonstrated clearly that people at the grassroots level did not approve of the alliance. The Congress and JD(S) had been traditional rivals in the previous assembly and Lok Sabha elections of the former old Mysore region.[7] The arithmetic calculation of the coalition allies about transfer of votes did not succeed. According to the post poll survey:

The belief that the alliance came together to merely deny the BJP a chance to come to power may well have caused sympathy among a segment of voters in favour of the BJP. Further, at the constituency level, the rivalry between the cadres of the Congress and the JD(S) led to a lacklustre campaign. Within both the Congress and the JD(S) there

was unhappiness with the choice of candidates. All the infighting within these two parties could also explain their collective poor performance.[8]

The results in favour of the BJP in Muslim-dominated areas proved that the BJP is not an 'untouchable' party to a section of minorities.[9] Such support by a section of minorities also conveys the message that they are not affected by incidents such as attacks on Muslims elsewhere during the BJP regime from 2014 to 2019. The long-standing myth that 'the BJP would not be able to divide the larger social coalition of MOD (Muslims, Other Backward Classes and Dalits), which has always favoured the Congress, has been broken. At least a section of the MOD appears to have supported the BJP this time.'[10] These communities previously united in supporting the Congress as its regular vote bank. Changes in their voting behaviour were manifested in the 2019 elections.

It is true that 'the BJP's victory in Vokkaliga-dominated areas shows that it has managed to divide the votes of the dominant caste in Karnataka, which has traditionally aligned itself with the Janata Dal (Secular)',[11] but religion and caste became shelter for each other in these elections.

Another important factor that has played a major role in BJP'S spectacular victory is the organizational ability of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as well as the BJP. Their preparation for the election began much earlier and was very systematic. They made efforts to reach every section of the urban and rural areas in the state as a part of their electoral campaign. Large numbers of youth members of the party were actively involved in the campaign. The RSS and BJP's continuous interaction with youth in different public spheres appealed to them. This was not the case with both the Congress and JD(S). Senior leaders of the Congress and JD(S) concentrated on a few selected constituencies and their absence in others resulted in the inactivity of ordinary members. Overall, their organizational ability and performance was poor. Leaders of the Communist parties, especially youth leaders, made efforts to be an alternative to all parties in the state through their online and offline political activities. But their influence was confined to only a few areas where it had some political base.

Dynastic politics is another issue that became big news in Karnataka. A large number of people did not approve of the dynastic politics of Deve Gowda and his family's dominance in the party and in state politics. However, the family politics of the BJP leaders did not receive any negative response. The sons of B. S. Yeddyurappa and C. M. Udasi, another prominent BJP leader, were elected without any difficulties.[12]

Women's representation for the Lok Sabha is poor. Social indicators show that Karnataka is comparatively empowering women, but the same is not reflected in their political representation in representative institutions, especially in the Lok Sabha. There were 27 women candidates but only two won, one independent and another from the BJP. 'From Karnataka, the best representation of women in Parliament was in 1991 when three MPs were elected.'[13] The first time a woman candidate was elected to the Lok Sabha from Karnataka was in 1962.

With the defeat of many senior leaders 'the State's representation in the 17th Lok Sabha will be the youngest in at least two decades.'[14] It needs to be seen whether newly elected youth members of the Parliament from the state are going to make much of a difference or not, as far as discussion and debates on the issues of national importance and the issues important to the state are concerned. One of the long-standing facts about the political representatives from the state is that they have not been very articulate and assertive on the issues concerning the state. The average age of Karnataka MPs in the 14th, 15th and 16th Lok Sabha was 57.7, 57.9 and 61 years respectively, whereas, the average age of the state's MPs in the17th Lok Sabha is 56.7 years.[15] Table 16.2 provides information about MPs belonging to different age groups.

The electoral politics of Karnataka was influenced by many issues in 2019. The credible leadership of Narendra Modi and his distinct way of campaigning in Karnataka with seven rallies significantly influenced the electoral outcome of the 2019 elections. The leadership of Narendra Modi became more influential since there was no alternative leadership provided by the opposition, particularly the Congress party at the national level as well as the state leaders. The leadership of Narendra Modi became more acceptable than the leadership of any other political party. During the campaign, 'it was patently visible that the BJP

Table 16.2 *Age of the Members of Parliament from Karnataka*

Age Group of MPs	14th LS	15th LS	16th LS	17th LS
Below 30	0	0	0	2
30–40	2	0	0	0
40–50	7	7	2	3
50–60	8	8	12	10
60–70	5	7	8	10
Above 70	6	6	6	3

Source: Mohit M. Rao, 'Karnataka's Representation in 17th Lok Sabha Is the Youngest in Recent Years', *The Hindu*, 29 May 2019.

was taking every effort to make it a presidential style poll, with their candidates seeking votes in the name of the Prime Minister.'[16] Modi became more important than the party. More than half of the people who said that they had voted for the BJP were of the firm opinion that 'they would not have done so if Mr Modi were not the prime ministerial candidate.'[17]

The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)—Lokniti post-poll data indicated, 'The level of satisfaction with the central government was reasonably high.'[18] This was one of the reasons for the upsurge of the BJP in Karnataka. The Congress and the JD(S) did not effectively criticize the failure of the central government. 'The failure on the jobs front, the crisis caused by demonetization and the collapse of small businesses following the implementation of the goods and service tax regime hardly figured as a cohesive plot around which the opposition mounted an attack on the BJP for its failings.'[19] Security issues related to the Pulwama attack and the Balakot air strike too received great emphasis during the election campaign from both the BJP and the coalition allies.

Language related to personal attacks used by some political parties became controversial. The Election Commission advised political parties 'to refrain from using offensive and objectionable language against rivals and strictly follow the ECI guidelines in the interest of conducting

free and fair elections.'[20] The Election Commission decided it had to intervene.[21]

The language and culture of the state were expected to become issues in the election, but they did not play any role in the voters' choice. The Karnataka government had taken a decision to have a separate state flag in the year 2018[22] and it was widely supported by intellectuals, activists as well as common people. Regarding the aspiration of the people on issues like having any cultural symbol, it was rightly observed that the non-Hindi-speaking regions of India would 'come up with creative ways of fighting for their cultural freedom.'[23] The election result indicated that voters did not give much importance to regional culture and related issues.

Caste identity was a more important factor for dominant communities such as Lingayats and Vokkaligas rather than ideology for getting more representation. Of the total 28 Lok Sabha seats, 9 are from elected members of the Lingayat community; all of them won by the BJP. Vokkaliga community's share in the victory is six seats; four from the BJP. 60 per cent of Vokkaligas and 87 per cent of Lingayats voted for the BJP (see Table 16.3). 'The post-poll data indicate that six out of every 10 Vokkaliga votes went this time to the BJP.'[24]

Table 16.3 *Castes and Communities Voting in Karnataka*

Caste/Community	Cong–JD(S) (%)	BJP (%)	Others (%)
Upper Caste	31	63	6
Vokkaliga	33	60	7
Lingayat	10	87	3
Other OBC	46	47	7
Dalit	49	42	9
Adivasi	36	54	10
Muslim	73	18	9
Others	36	55	9

Source: Veenadevi and Nagesh K. L., 'Post-poll Survey: Karnataka Heading towards Political Uncertainty', *The Hindu*, 27 May 2019.

These are the communities which were known for their progressive positions on socio-political issues. Lingayats, being a non-Vedic community, opposed social hierarchy and any kind of social domination over them by the others. Vokkaligas, being a community more within Hinduism, asserted freedom and equality in spiritual matters. In fact, it has its own cultural institutions like *maths*. In the politics of the state, it played a very significant role in changing the power structure of the state. Because of its stalwart leaders and community's willingness to remain united, it became one of the forward-looking communities of Karnataka in economic and political spheres.

The leaders of the Lingayat Dharma Mahasabha had warned that if the BJP government at the centre was not ready to meet its demand of separate religious status for the Lingayat community, it would have to face the consequences in the elections.[25] Although the BJP government did not respond to the demand of the Lingayats, the warning given by the organization did not materialise. A majority of Lingayat voters did not give any importance to the warnings.

It was expected that former Chief Minister and AHINDA[26] leader Siddaramaiah's presence in North Karnataka would help the JD (S)–Congress alliance because together with the Lingayat votes he would make it Li-Ahinda for the alliance.[27] The expectation of the Lingayats and AHINDA communities coming together did not come true despite the Congress governments' support for Lingayats' demand for a separate religious community in 2018. The community demanded a separate religious status and at the same time it 'is the largest established vote bank of the BJP.'[28] The call for a separate religious identity by intellectuals, some religious heads and activists did not work in favour of the Congress. Lingayats could have adopted a more convincing strategy but they did not and moreover there was no enthusiasm to do so. Their political beliefs 'are not in tandem with its cultural ideals'.[29]

The Congress and JD(S) believe in inclusive and secular democratic politics. They could have used better ways of expressing this to the people but failed in doing so. This failure is primarily responsible for the people moving towards the BJP. If secular and inclusive politics is to be alive in the future, the parties have to be more introspective about their mismanagement of political actions in the past. Factional

politics of the coalition partners played a crucial role in determining the electoral outcome.

HIGH-PROFILE PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES

Mandya constituency: This constituency covers the entire district of Mandya and a part of the Mysore district. It was regarded as a high voltage constituency because there was a clash between the independent candidate—actor turned politician, Sumalatha Ambareesh—and the JD(S) candidate Nikhil Kumaraswamy, son of the former Chief Minister of Karnataka H. D. Kumaraswamy. After the denial of the Congress party ticket, Sumalatha decided to contest from Mandya constituency as an independent candidate. Her husband Ambareesh, who recently passed away, was a politician and one of the prominent actors of the Kannada film industry. The BJP sensed that the public mood was in favour of Sumalatha and accordingly announced its support to her.

The support given by the members of Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), dissatisfied the local Congress and JD(S) leaders, party workers, women and youth, and enabled Sumalatha to win the Mandya Lok Sabha constituency. Sympathy support was also forthcoming on account of Ambareesh's death and the effective involvement of some actors from the Kannada film industry. Besides, Sumalatha's patience and politeness in responding to criticisms by the JD(S) must have also become a factor.

Gulbarga constituency: The most surprising result in this election was the defeat of Mallikarjun Kharge in Gulbarga by the BJP candidate Umesh Jadhav. According to some local reporters and social activists, even the section in the Lingayat community which was more vocal in demanding an independent religious identity for themselves was not so committed in the campaign for Kharge. Kharge's role in bringing several developmental projects to the Hyderabad Karnataka region and particularly the district did not appeal to the voters in the constituency. Some dissatisfied leaders belonging to the backward classes left the Congress and joined the BJP. All these leaders made a huge effort in wooing their community votes and defeating Kharge.

It was also revealed by some activists that leaders belonging to the backward classes did not like Kharge's growing credibility as a national leader because they were overshadowed by him. Some of these leaders had challenged Kharge's leadership when they were in Congress. The election gave them an opportunity to unite against him by actively involving themselves as leaders in the BJP district unit.

Kharge, being a leader with a progressive vision may not be liked by the conservative members of the Lingayat community and others. Jadhav, being an upcoming leader can be more easily managed by his opponents. In district power politics, Kharge has always been very vocal and progressive which made conservative elements of the Lingayat community uncomfortable.

Tumkur constituency: It was one of the prestigious constituencies in the elections since former Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda contested from it. Tumkur is a part of the old Mysore region in whichVokkaligas and Lingayats are the dominant communities. G. S. Basavaraj with the BJP ended up winning in this parliamentary constituency. Lack of unity between the coalition partners and the factional politics of the Congress and JD(S) may be important issues responsible for the defeat of Deve Gowda. Many of the Congress leaders in Tumkur were against the party's decision to give the seat to the JD(S) and some among these had even refused to campaign.[30] Most Lingayat and Vokkaliga votes consolidated for the BJP and the JD(S) respectively. Deve Gowda's introduction of the third generation of his family was not acceptable to a large number of voters. Some people did not like leaving his Hassan constituency to his grandson and contesting from Tumkur.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2019 ELECTION RESULTS FOR THE STATE POLITICS

The 2019 election has implications for state politics in terms of future political mobilization for social and political change. The present victory of the BJP and the strong presence of right-wing organizations in the state may encourage youth to support them. A large number of youths from the state preferred the BJP over the other parties in this

election.[31] Such developments become a big challenge to the politics of the Congress and JD(S) in the state.

Karnataka witnessed the experience of fierce and strategic political mobilization of backward classes in the 1970s itself. It was Devaraj Urs who was the forefather of the idea of challenging the political domination of the dominant castes by mobilizing non-dominant castes.[32] This experiment was repeated and successfully deployed by Siddaramaiah who considers himself a follower of Urs. Looking at the 2019 election results, doubts arise with regard to the success of the strategy of mobilizing backward classes. In this election, the dominant castes strategically succeeded in dominating the political space. Majoritarian parties like the BJP succeeded in achieving greater electoral success even though leaders like Siddhramaiah were very much active in state politics.

The Tumkur constituency result has certain lessons for the Congress and JD(S). In every election, major political parties cannot deny the role and significance of alternative political forces. Both the Congress and JD(S) did not pay much attention to the presence of the Communist Party of India (CPI) candidate which resulted in the candidate getting more than 18,000 votes. Communist parties have a considerable presence in certain areas in Karnataka due to a strong network of trade unions and committed party workers.

Karnataka's governmental stability is a major casuality of the 2019 elections. 'The disaffection has led a large number of Congressmen to question the utility of the coalition on grounds of sectarian loyalties, personal interests, and future electoral prospects; some them with large interests at stake have decided to jump ship'.[33] 17 MLAs resigned from the assembly in July 2019 expressing their displeasure about the performance of the coalition government. The Congress and JD(S) attempted to retain these legislators by adopting various strategies but failed. Eventually, the H. D. Kumaraswamy-led coalition government fell on 23 July 2019. It was voted out of power after 14 months.

BJP formed the government under the leadership of B. S. Yeddyurappa on 29 July 2019. The speaker of the Karnataka Assembly disqualified 17 MLAs and tendered his resignation. According to the *Hindu* editorial:

All in all, the goings on in Karnataka show that the Constitution can be twisted and misread to suit anyone's political interests. In an atmosphere in which political loyalties swing like a pendulum, constitutional functionaries appear to be inclined to give self serving interpretations to the founding law and let the web of confusion be disentangled by the judiciary.[34]

The disgruntled MLAs approached the Supreme Court of India against their disqualification. Karnataka Chief Minister B. S. Yeddyurappa's delayed expansion of the cabinet took place on 20 August 2019 after three weeks of forming the government. There is no representation from religious minorities and some districts in the ministry of B. S. Yeddyurappa. It appears that some objective parameters were adopted by the BJP high command for the expansion of the B. S. Yeddyurappa government. Many aspirants expressed their disappointment. It may provide scope for the growth of dissidence.

Formation of a ministry is becoming a more difficult task in recent times and is responsible for a growing number of dissatisfied legislators. As a result, the number of aspirants for ministerial posts has been increasing. Objective evaluation of the performance of legislators and ministers in terms of delivery of services to the people and party building needs to be considered while forming the ministry. Perhaps, an adoption of clearly and objectively defined parameters for appointing legislators as ministers is imperative. Perhaps, Narendra Modi's style of formation of a council of ministers can help to address these problems.

CONCLUSION

Many important issues confronting the state did not receive the required significance of both the political actors and the voters. Issues such as water disputes between Goa and Karnataka, farm loan waiver scheme, drought relief and other development issues could have received much more serious attention but that did not happen. Political parties could have used better ways of reaching the people through these issues, but failed in doing so. It may also be the case that people lost trust in the politics of welfare programmes of the Congress-JD(S) coalition government and were attracted to the political narrative of

the BJP on Hindutva, nationalism, development and strong leadership. There was no genuine concern on the part of most people towards either developmental or cultural state issues.

The 2019 election results certainly show that the BJP electoral base has been strengthened statewide in Karnataka, winning the confidence of almost all sections of society. In the present politics, self-interests of political parties and individuals appear to have become more important than common good of the society. Such developments are not conducive for reinforcing the democratic political culture in Karnataka. However, balancing the self-interest and collective interest is imperative for strengthening democratic politics. The strengthening of intra party democracy also is necessary for promoting mutual respect.

NOTES

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