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A Nava Karnataka as Part of ‘New India’

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Karnataka’s land reforms and creative backward-caste alliances in the 1970s and 1980s broke the dominance of landed castes and spurred innovative development programmes. Today, the state is forsaking this legacy for narrow-minded goals.

A few months after the national Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dismissed B.S. Yediyurappa as the chief minister of Karnataka and appointed Basavaraj Bommai in his stead, hoardings on buses, bus shelters and prominent road junctions in the state juxtaposed portraits of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the new chief minister with the slogan: ‘A Nava Karnataka for a Nava Bharat’.

The hoardings and slogans announced the confident consolidation of a new model of governance for Karnataka and a willing surrender of state autonomy. Karnataka, which had once earned a justifiable reputation for more than a century of state-driven ‘developmentalism’ and which had pioneered inclusive social justice programmes, now hurtles towards a replication of the Gujarat and U.P models.

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Such a political configuration is marked by increasing social support for Hindutva as a social and national agenda, the absence of any substantial regional party, the redefinition of notions of development, increasing communalism, and the manifestation of ‘electoral authoritarianism’ in which the state deploys its strength against any form of dissent.

This is in Karnataka, which for a century had witnessed a ‘broadening’ and ‘deepening’ of democracy, drawing from an older Mysore political heritage. (Raghavan and Manor 2009). Its predecessor, the erstwhile Mysore state, had pioneered reservations for Backward Classes as early as 1918. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Devaraj Urs, Karnataka in the 1970s redefined principles of distributive justice through land reforms and creative alliances of Backward Castes. These policies challenged the dominance of the landed castes and formulated innovative development programmes. They also protected the state from the worst of the Emergency excesses. Ramakrishna Hegde, chief minister between 1983 and 1988, further strengthened democracy through his government’s commitment towards decentralisation via panchayat raj legislation.

Why is Karnataka forsaking this legacy of big and innovative ideas for small, narrow-minded and sectarian measures today? This article attempts a thick description of the precipitous decline of the state over the last few years, to outline what Karnataka shares with other parts of the country and what remains specific to this region.

New legislation in the service of exclusionary agendas

As in some other parts of the country, there has been a slew of draconian and anti-people legislation in Karnataka since 2019. A new anti-constitutional reverence for 3.5 crore livestock was in the passing of the Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Act in 2020, with the conspicuous and unprecedented conduct of a cow puja in the legislature building. Though aimed at the food cultures and livelihoods of Muslims and Dalits, the law has caused widespread economic distress in all sections of the farming community.

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The new prohibitions, by criminalising economic activity, have engendered an economy that thrives on illegality. The meat trade is now controlled by a new realm of ‘rentiers’ in the form of police and vigilantes, who extort, confiscate, and even arrest; all the while remaining untouched by any system of accountability.

Karnataka has also pushed through the legislative assembly the ironically termed Protection of the Right to Freedom of Religion bill. The bill goes much further than [other similar acts](#) in interfering in interfaith marriages and targeting institutions whose licences can be

suspended on mere suspicion of ‘conversion’. Such legislation, which infantilises women, SCs, STs and other vulnerable groups, is couched in the salvationist rhetoric of rescuing Hindus and Hinduism from perceived threats.

Although the government has for now kept on hold an ordinance on wages and labour rights, to increase the working day to twelve hours from eight hours, it is clear that the interest of the state is less in protecting workers than in making for ‘greater ease of business.’

But it is the obverse of such legislative activity that is more interesting. Sometimes, laws are being enacted in order to violate the rule of law. The Karnataka government defied a Supreme Court judgement on removing unauthorised religious structures on public land by passing a law to save them from demolition. In one stroke, the government undermined the capacity of municipal laws to protect and democratically develop public spaces.

Inverting the rule of law

In tandem with this punitive legislative overdrive is the systematic effort to code as ‘terrorist’ activities that are political critiques of the state, intraparty differences, or disturbances of public law and order.

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The state has freely deployed the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and has [more sedition cases](#) filed on the basis of social media posts than any other state. Karnataka’s public life is now marked by a deep sense of intolerance, willingly promoted by a police force that criminalises civic life — as in the ban on Munawar Faruqui’s stand-up show — and simultaneously normalises forms of criminality — as in moves to drop cases against those in power.

In September 2020, the BJP government decided to withdraw 62 cases of violence, destruction of property and vandalism pending against its party leaders — including ministers, MPs, and MLAs. This decision came over the objections of top police officials, prosecutors, and the law department. Just a month before, though, the state had invoked UAPA when an intra-Congress-party fight that took a more violent turn was swiftly cast as a ‘communal’ riot. Many of the 370 people arrested, primarily Muslims, were denied bail (more recently one of the incarcerated members has attempted to commit suicide.)

No wonder that police personnel belonging to at least two police stations, Kaup in Dakshin Kannada and Vijayapura in Bijapur, flaunted saffron clothing on police premises on Vijayadashami day in 2021, emboldened by the support and endorsement of ministers and politicians alike.

Political representation and the power of capital

Despite claims to the contrary, BJP rule in Karnataka deploys the three Ms: money, media, and muscle power. Elected posts across levels are now both a source of new accumulation and a guarantee of protection. Elected representatives become ‘yajamanas’, the ‘big men’ who provide solutions and succour outside the complex and dense formal institutions of democracy.

The reproductive circuits between political power and economic aggrandisement have enabled stalwarts across political parties to set up their fiefdoms. Kanakapura is the stronghold of D.K. Shivakumar, a Congressman, Hassan that of Janata Dal (Secular)’s H.D. Deve Gowda and his sons and grandsons, and Shivamogga that of the BJP’s Yeddyurappa and sons. These are examples of how political power and economic strength are mutually imbricated. It is not surprising that 97% of the members of the [2018 legislative assembly](#) were crorepatis and 77 of the 221 MLAs had criminal cases filed against them.

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But these are examples of old-style Congress corruption. The Contractors’ Association recently wrote to the prime minister to complain about the unprecedented expectation of 40% as a cut in public construction transactions. That the contractors themselves made such a complaint highlights what V. Balasubramanian, a former bureaucrat, has [called](#) a shift from *mamool* — gratification — to mega-corruption.

This is not merely an expansion in scale. The BJP has redefined corruption, funnelling money upwards to the party at the centre. Corruption has become both routinised and normalised, given the overt monetisation of government posts and positions. That a former high court judge, disappointed when a bribe did not land her a governorship, **did not hesitate** to publicly recover her ‘investment’, speaks volumes.

Capital and the subsumption of public interest

The growth and accumulation of capital in Karnataka has two interlinked aspects. On the one hand is the growth of Bengaluru as the pre-eminent megapolis for the ‘new economy’. The immediate impact has been a complementary burgeoning of speculative urbanism, in which real estate has emerged as the most lucrative investment for **both entrepreneurial players and politicians** (Balakrishnan and Pani 2021).

It is not for nothing that the most sought-after public offices are in Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), Bangalore Development Authority, and the Public Works Department; with the revenue ministry ranking second. That a former housing minister is popularly called ‘Layout’ Krishnappa is only one indicator of the extent to which real estate and the construction industry have become synonymous with political gains.

It is to support and extend such speculative economies that the ‘Land Reforms Amendment Act (2020)’ was brought in — first as an ordinance to enable ‘ease of business,’ and later enacted with little consultation or legislative debate. Its passage has led to an open and speculative market in agricultural and rural land acquisition, and its negative impact on small and marginal farmers and on agriculture is imminent.

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The office of the public ombudsman, the Lok Ayukta, which had earlier made significant contributions to upholding public administrative accountability, has decayed into just another layer of the bureaucracy. This has been paralleled by the ineffectiveness of the Anti-Corruption Bureau. The result is the deterioration of the state administrative apparatus.

Karnataka was the forerunner in institutionalising decentralised democracy, which paved the way for constitutional amendments for effective panchayat raj and urban local bodies across the country. Since 2018, however, the panchayat system has been steadily eroded, crippled by fund deficits, delayed elections, and continuous political interference. A recent attempt to **initiate delimitation** of village panchayats indicates efforts to both postpone elections to the zilla and taluk panchayats and to derail the regular functioning of decentralised administration structures. The tardiness in holding elections to the BBMP, the most important municipality, since 2015 is a case in point, with MLAs showing great reluctance to relinquish their hold on this cash cow.

Karnataka has also turned a blind eye to excellent examples from elsewhere of innovations in governance. Rather than rebuilding a new and innovative public health system (using the examples of Family Welfare Centres in Kerala, or Mohalla Clinics pioneered by the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi), the increased privatisation of health remains undisturbed. Currently, 70% of health care needs are met by the private sector and affordability and lack of regulation are key issues. Instead of strengthening public education and refreshing government schooling, (as AAP has done in Delhi) or improving nutritional levels at the school level, the state has supported the rampant privatisation of education.

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Karnataka is no exception to the visible backlash against women, with a persistent and dangerous return to the invocation of nationalist and kinship ideals away from languages of autonomy and rights. Statements by politicians endorse this type of misogyny. Health Minister K. Sudhakar, the BJP’s national general secretary C.T. Ravi, as well as Chief Minister Bommai, have cried ‘culture in danger’ to comment against women who prefer to stay single, not have children, or might participate in surrogacy childbirth.

Such statements must be taken together with other actions of the government, such as shutting down 187 counselling centres offering much-sought-after services for women facing domestic abuse and violence. This comes at a time when Karnataka has witnessed a massive increase in spousal violence, according to the **latest National Family Health Survey**, the fifth round in 2019-20. Combined with

the overt power that has conceded to (usually male) vigilante groups to forcefully intervene in what they believe are assaults on Hindu culture, a language of rights has been replaced with an affective charge that robs women of their agency.

Legitimate institutions, think tanks, and independent organisations have been marginalised, and the state seeks advice from only select individuals. Often, there is no attention to the conflict of interests that they might represent. For instance, by uncritically endorsing the New Education Policy 2020, Karnataka has now made it legitimate for vested and parochial interests to interfere in curriculum changes that suit the larger agenda for the saffronisation of education. It has also willingly surrendered its right to formulate more state-specific policies for education.

By consistently overriding the rule by experts, the state steps away from knowledge as the basis of state policy.

Sops for dominant castes

Perhaps the most striking transformation since 2019 has been in the visible resurgence of dominant castes that had been stemmed during the times of both Urs and Hegde.

From an earlier focus on the development of Scheduled Castes, backward classes, and minorities, the government now shows a marked preference for dominant castes. It has initiated a series of Caste Development Corporations in the name of one or another (usually dominant) castes. Brahmin, Lingayat, and now, the Vokkaliga corporations are favoured in budgetary allotments, at the cost of allotments to corporations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes and Other Backward Classes, thereby undoing Urs' backward class legacy.

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Decentralised development, welfare of the marginalised, and region-specific policies have taken back seats, even as development is redefined via the consolidation of caste identities and alliances, Instead, its obverse, underdevelopment, has been aggressively redefined. New movements for sub-reservations by sub-castes of different caste groups, or for changes in reservations status, clearly shift the discourse away from (caste) discrimination to 'economically weaker sections' and 'underdevelopment,' though in the name of specific castes and sub-castes.

Conclusions

There has been a spread of a model of communalism developed in Dakshina Kannada, a highly polarised district that has been a laboratory for the Hindutva project for close to a century. Vigilante groups in Dakshina Kannada have engaged in a form of 'sustainable communalism' — the everyday, continuous and low-grade violence against minorities that prevents any form of camaraderie, friendships, partnerships or intimacies. Indeed, the calumny of 'love jihad' was first used in Dakshina Kannada in 2007, to malign inter-faith relationships between Muslim men and Hindu women.

The vigilantes have opposed minority businesses and even minority religious rights. This model has spread quickly. Calls for the economic boycott of minority businesses is a strategy gaining popularity across the state. So have measures to police minorities: in Chitradurga, for instance, a Tahsildar has called for an enumeration of all Christians.

In tandem, the sectarian sentiments of the dominant castes, rather than public welfare, have become decisive in guiding government policies. For instance, heads of the mathas now decide whether children in government schools should be allowed to eat eggs or not.

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As these instances show, Karnataka today relies on two forms of informal power which are becoming increasingly visible. This form of 'divided sovereignty', though known and practised earlier (as has been shown by Thomas Hansen for the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra), has taken a sharp and distinct form over the past decade or so in Karnataka.

First, in the struggles for sub-caste reservations within reservations and for changes in reservation status, we see an overt sharing of power between state and religious leaders. Matha heads have lined up to become visible and assertive political actors, voicing their

opinions on a range of issues, participating in public rallies, issuing threats to the state and mobilising their own constituents in shows and spectacles of power. Although thus far they have stopped short of entering representational politics, they blur the once clear division of labour between the legal authority of the state and the moral authority of the matha.

A second kind of sharing of power is also becoming clear in the dominant role played by local vigilante groups, which, far from being fringe groups are gathering wider presence and power. Largely but not solely of the Hindu Right, these groups violently intervene in social matters. They lay claim to a different kind of ‘moral’ authority – that of the ‘Hindu nation’ that is being brought into being.

By no means has the state itself abdicated or relinquished its legislative power. Instead, the power of law-making has been adapted towards the production of an ethnicised Hindu nation. The Karnataka BJP has successfully pushed all political parties towards a commitment to such a nation.

The co-option of historical, mythical, religious and caste symbols and icons into an all-enveloping rhetoric of Hindu greatness assures recognition and not real rights, pacification and not policies, and only an illusion of democracy. The emerging forms of legislation encourage underprivileged and marginalised sections to fight over limited opportunities and goods via vigilantism, protectionism, and extortionism.

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On the all-important question of language, Karnataka has remained content with the symbolics of declaring 2021 the year of Kannada Kayaka, while relinquishing its regional strength to the occupying force of Hindi, an official language. It has surrendered its linguistic autonomy and pride, in preference to robustly building up the language through innovative community library systems and translation projects.

Karnataka’s political and societal decline is marked by a simultaneous erosion of constitutional principles, norms of democracy, and basic humaneness. There has been a resetting and realignment of the relation between the state and capital; the federal region and the Indian Union, the secular and sacred, and, of course, the private and public. In all of these, not only are power, politics and citizenship being redefined but the very identity of Karnataka is being recast.

A Nava Karnataka is being birthed, imagined and directed by the RSS. Whether the new directions will be consolidated in the next year or two will depend on how successfully the BJP in Karnataka is able to stifle intensifying dissensions in its own ranks and completely replace an old-style Congress corruption with the promise of Hindu Rashtra. And, of course, it has to continue to convince important industrial interests (of whom the ‘new industrialists’ at least have remained silent so far) that capital will not be endangered by that promise.

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