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## The Long March of Hindutva in Karnataka

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*Karnataka's recent spate of anti-minority policies must be seen as the logical development of social, cultural and political processes over several decades, which have created a Hindu samaj in the state.*

A few days after the Karnataka High Court upheld the state government's ban on hijabs in classrooms, several of the state's temples — some voluntarily and some under the pressure of Sangh Parivar — declared that Muslim traders would not be allowed to set up stalls during the annual temple festivals. In the legislative assembly, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government quoted obscure rules dating to the previous Congress government to argue that such a ban on Muslim traders was not illegal.

Emboldened by state support, Hindutva organisations have advocated an economic boycott of Muslims in many parts of the state. Bajrang Dal cadres have been openly training in the use of arms. There are strong indications to believe that much more is in the pipeline.

These recent developments in Karnataka are not exceptional, but a part of a larger narrative that is taking deep roots, resulting in a continuous onslaught on minority communities.

Several BJP legislators have, in the state assembly, argued that India is a Hindu nation and the question of banning Hindu religious markers (like in the case of the hijab) is irrelevant. K.S. Eshwarappa, a cabinet minister, [declared](#) that the saffron flag would soon replace the tricolour as the national flag. (He had earlier, during elections, [said](#) that BJP did not need Muslim votes.) The assembly speaker, while chairing a legislative session, [openly told](#) an opposition party MLA that one day everyone would have to accept the RSS.

Over the last two years, the BJP government in Karnataka is competing with the BJP governments in Assam and Uttar Pradesh in bringing in laws curbing rights of minorities – be it in food (beef bans), marriage (conversion bill), or dignity (changes in text books). Though these measures have been implemented during with the second term of Narendra Modi's government at the centre, they need to be seen as the logical development of social-cultural-political processes that were set in motion in the state over the last few decades.

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Karnataka has been regarded as a progressive state with a rich history of social harmony and egalitarian movements. This is not untrue. Beginning with the much celebrated Vachana movement in the 12th century, the Sufi-Bhakti challenge to Vedic spiritual regime, the brief structural changes brought in by Tipu Sultan, to the modern day vibrant peoples' movement that set the egalitarian agenda in the public discourse during the 70s and 80s, Karnataka has had several progressive moments.

But as Ambedkar puts it succinctly, even though there were many revolutionary upsurges in history, ruling regimes were successful in hatching a counter revolution. In Karnataka, the ruling feudal order and its Brahmanical ideology have been successful in co-opting and taming counter currents, making egalitarian ideals mere show pieces. Hindutva forces have adopted different strategies for different societies to cultivate their ideal Hindu Brahmanical samaj. Even when they have not been victorious, these forces have been very adaptive. Unlike others, they have learnt lessons from their failures.

### Kannada nationalism and Hindutva

During the anti-colonial movement, Kannada nationalism became a fulcrum of political mobilisation. It was during this period that Hindutva first made an imprint on the Kannada mind.

The early assertion of Kannada nationalism was spearheaded by the Hindu upper caste business and literary leaders from the Bombay Karnataka region, the Kannada-majority districts that were part of the Bombay Presidency. This was an area geographically and politically proximate to Tilakite and Savarkarite Hindu nationalism.

In such Kannada nationalistic literature, the glory of the Hindu past was constantly evoked to inculcate a sense of pride in Kannada culture. For instance, Alur Venkatarao, termed the *Kannada kulapurohita* or the high priest of Kannada, consistently stoked the fire of nationalist pride by igniting sentiments attached to a 'destroyed' Hindu past.

Evocations like these utilised a communal interpretation of history. The pride of the Vijayanagara empire and the supposed destructive Muslim conquest of Karnataka became an oft-repeated leitmotif of many Kannada novels of the time. The 1916 novel *Kannadigara Karma Kathe* ("The Fatal Story of Kannadigas") by Galaganatha was typical of the genre. It described the fall of the Hindu Kannadiga empire of Vijayanagara at the hands of the Muslim Bahamani sultanate. The work's inspiration was the Marathi novel *Vajaraghat*, by Hari Narayan Apte, which describes the betrayal of Shivaji by Mughals.

Narendra Modi's Hindutva, Hindu Rashtra, polarisation politics, and portraying Muslims as a permanent enemy are part of cultivating a permanent electoral communal majority, something which Ambedkar had always cautioned against.

The Kannada nationalist movement was a marked contrast to the Tamil self-respect movement. The self-respect movement veered towards an egalitarian society, questioning caste oppression and the domination of Hindi in the Indian nationalist struggle. A comparison of the flags used by the two movements is highly revealing of their respective ideological positioning. The Tamil black and red flag signified a movement towards an equal society. The yellow and the red of the Kannada nationalist flag, as described by the then leaders of the movement, signified *arishina* (turmeric) and *kumkum* (vermilion) – symbols of Brahmanical rituals.

Tamil pride had a strong anti-Brahmanical tradition through its constant ridicule of Brahmanism. Kannada nationalism adopted the icon of the goddess Bhuvaneshwari, whose appearance projected Brahmanism. While Tamil nationalism turned to anti-Aryan *Puranas* in search of its historical roots, Karnataka nationalism asserted itself through Hindu *Puranas*.

Tilakite-style nationalism was less prominent in the southern part of Karnataka, then under the princely state of Mysore. But the region was also not radicalised by Periyarist, Ambedkarite, or communist ideologies prevalent in the neighbouring regions. Mysore had instituted reservations for Shudra castes, predominantly the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats, in the Praja Pratinidhi Sabha assembly from the early 20th century. While this ensured a 'Shudraisation' of the state's administration and power structures, these dominant castes were easily Brahmanised as they moved upwards. Learning Sanskrit and mimicking Brahmanical customs and habits became a matter of cultural pride. While a few radical Gandhians dedicated themselves to the education of Dalits and challenging the Brahmanical social order, the main ideological currents in the state were status quoist.

## Embedded Hindutva

The Brahmanical ethos and order served the social and cultural needs of the new rulers in maintaining the caste hierarchy needed for the unaltered, semi-feudal economy of post-independence Karnataka. The pride and prestige of dominant castes, and their role in nation building, was articulated in a Brahmanical idiom. Such an embedded and unconscious Hindutva was prevalent as common sense in socio-political life though the period of the Congress party system into the late 1980s.

Though the state's politics and society were led by Brahmanised dominant castes, which did not had any ideological antagonism with a Hindu rashtra, Hindutva electoral politics itself had to wait for more than two decades to emerge. An analysis of the electoral performance of Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the BJP's predecessor party, is helpful to understand the trajectory of the Hindutva forces in Karnataka soon after Independence.

The BJS had a presence in all regions of Karnataka. Though it could achieve its first electoral victory only in the 1967 elections, in earlier elections it was the runner-up in many constituencies, first in Bombay Karnataka and later in Mysore and coastal Karnataka. Its vote share ranged between 2% and 7% but was steady and incremental.

What checked the BJS's political growth during these early years was that disgruntled conservative and feudal forces, who later became the social base of Hindutva, did not completely break with the Congress. Those who did break away from the Congress did not support the Jana Sangh, but rather formed their own parties.

The Congress thus remained stable. Even at the end of the Emergency, while most of India was awash with anti-Congress sentiments, Karnataka went with the Congress. Indira Gandhi, who was defeated in the 1977 general elections, was re-elected to the Lok Sabha from Chikmagalur constituency in Karnataka in 1978.

Over a hundred year period, the RSS has created a Hindu electoral samaj: a coalition of upper castes, dominant castes, and disgruntled OBC and Dalits castes under the Hindutva ideology.

One of the reasons for the Congress' strength in Karnataka was Chief Minister Devraj Urs's policies which addressed the concerns of the historically downtrodden communities. Under Urs' government of 1972-78, the combined strength of OBCs, Dalits, and Muslims overtook the combined strength of the upper castes and dominant castes for the first time in the legislative history of Karnataka. In some parts of the state, especially in the coastal districts, land reforms were implemented successfully, breaking the hold of upper castes and dominant castes. An effective reservation policy for OBCs was also implemented. These measures resulted in relative empowerment and upward mobility of sections of OBCs, Dalits and Muslims.

Nevertheless, the RSS grew during the Emergency and post-Emergency period. Groups disenchanted with the Congress for its 'leftist' leanings and for accommodating downtrodden communities took shelter under the umbrella of the Janata Party. Such groups also found the RSS and BJS ideologies as more reliable political allies. The RSS also tapped the anti-dictatorial sentiments among the urban middle class and the elites of the Vokkaliga and Lingayat communities. They nurtured a base amongst OBC trading castes, who competed with Muslim traders in the Bombay Karnataka towns. OBC elites and sections of Dalits, who could not find space in the Congress were roped into the Sangh Parivar's fold as well.

In the 1978 elections to the Karnataka assembly, the first after the Emergency, the Janata Party got more than 37% of the votes. In the next elections, in 1983, Janata was voted to power as the single largest party with Ramakrishna Hegde as the chief minister. Hegde, a Brahmin, was accepted by the Lingayat community as their leader in their quest for an alternative to Urs and the 'left leaning' Congress.

Hegde forged alliances with the BJP which, which on the basis of dominant caste equations, won several seats in different regions of the state. The tragic history of socialist parties giving the fascist forces a new lease of life was repeated in Karnataka as it was done elsewhere. The Janata came back to power in 1985 with a comfortable margin, eroding the Congress foothold in Karnataka.

### **Emerging anti-Muslim violence**

Karnataka did not experience the horror of Partition or Hindu-Muslim clashes as did north India, which is perhaps why early Brahmanical political articulation in the state did not have much anti Muslim content. More than anti-Muslim political articulations, it was a growing Dalit assertion, the organised Dalit movement of the 1980s, and disenchantment with the Congress that pushed dominant caste groups towards the BJP.

In the late 1980s though, as the Ram Janmabhoomi movement gathered momentum, the Sangh Parivar engineered several communal riots. These riots occurred across south, central and northwest Karnataka, in cities and towns facing a sharp economic decline. They included Davanagere in central Karnataka, which was once considered the Manchester of Karnataka (for its thriving cotton mills) and the Moscow of Karnataka for the political orientation of its working classes.

In southern Karnataka, the Sangh Parivar was successful in instigating a dispute around the syncretic Bababudan Dargah shrine, where Hindus and Muslims alike offered prayers. From the late 1980s, the Sangh Parivar and its organisations began to push for Hindu rituals at the site. This slowly turned into a movement to take over the shrine through claims it was a temple forcibly converted to a dargah by Tipu Sultan. The issue soon began to be portrayed as the 'Ayodhya of the South'. The opportunistic and soft Hindutva politics of the Congress and other centrist parties in nurturing this issue is important in understanding the linear growth of the Sangh Parivar in the state post the 1990s.

In Karnataka, the Sangh Parivar and its ideology now has its social base spanning the upper castes to the Madigas from the Dalit community.

As in the rest of India, the 1990s in Karnataka were the beginning of the neo-liberal economic regime introduced by the Congress. The privatisation and corporatisation of the economy resulted in not only the collapse of livelihoods but also of an organised labour class, made up of OBC castes across Hindus and Muslims. The survival anxieties of OBC Hindus were channelised against Muslims, a section of whom could achieve relative social mobility by migrating to the Gulf states. Routine bargaining between the fishers of the Hindu Mogaveera castes and Muslim traders were blown out of proportion to consolidate the youth under Hindutva organisations.

Coastal Karnataka (once a bastion of left politics) and the Malnad region soon became strongholds for the RSS and the BJP. The RSS also provided a social base and security to the emerging education, commerce, and real estate businesses.

Along with these structural changes, the Congress' political hara-kiri in Karnataka also gave the BJP and Hindutva opportunities to multiply their influence. In 1989, the Lingayat leader Veerendra Patil was unceremoniously removed as chief minister by the Congress under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The drifting away of Lingayat community from the party was complete.

The BJP also gained from the splitting up of the Janata Dal in 1999. The JD (Secular), under H.D. Deve Gowda, identified with the Vokkaliga community, which had historical animosity and political competition with the Lingayats. The JDS was not an option for the Lingayats. This opportunity was seized on by the BJP, which crowned the Lingayat leader B.S. Yediyurappa as their party chief. The RSS also started working with several Lingayat seers on the agenda of Hindu unity. These developments further consolidated the Lingayat support to the BJP. By the 2004 elections, the Lingayat base of the erstwhile Janata Party was usurped by the BJP.

Apart from these political moves, the ideological mobilisation of the masses by the Sangh Parivar continued unabated in Bombay Karnataka and coastal Karnataka, with a renewed aggression acquired after the Babri Masjid demolition.

In coastal Karnataka, attacks were made on Muslims in the name of rescuing cows, moral policing, and the so-called 'love jihad'. The RSS mastered cultural politics by co-opting Shudra and anti-Brahmanical icons into the Hindu pantheon, and thereby constructed a strong mass base in the region. The Congress instead of opposing the rise in communalism, capitulated to this agenda and provided legitimacy to demands like observing Hindu rituals in the Bababudan Dargah.

## A Hindu samaj

An opportunistic alliance between the JDS and the BJP assumed power in Karnataka in 2006. Two years later, financed by the Reddy brothers of Bellary, the BJP came to power on its own under Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa.

Even though the government was marred with internal squabbles, the RSS agenda was scrupulously implemented. Yediyurappa's government nurtured several smaller OBC castes by helping them to establish their own *mathas* (monastic institutions) and by catering to the business and political interests of caste elites. Development boards were set up for these communities. Their historical and mythical leaders were commemorated with holidays or by the erection of statues. All this spread the base of BJP deep into the non-dominant OBC castes and consolidated Hindu support. The electoral vote share of BJP grew to 36% in 2018 from 4% in 1989.

The rightward shift of Karnataka was established by the fact that despite the BJP losing power in the state in 2013 to the Congress, in the 2014 general elections 19 BJP MPs (out of a total 28) were elected to the Lok Sabha from Karnataka. An analysis of the results suggests that upper castes and dominant castes consolidated themselves against the Congress coalition of backward castes, Dalits, and Muslims. During the 2019 elections, Karnataka elected 25 BJP MPs, despite the Congress and the JDS forming a coalition. The vote share of the BJP crossed 50% for the first time in the electoral history of Karnataka.

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Narendra Modi's Hindutva, Hindu rashtra, polarisation politics, and portraying Muslims as a permanent enemy are part of cultivating a permanent electoral communal majority, a threat to democracy that Ambedkar had always worried about and cautioned against.

This process never stops, whether the BJP is in power or not. Over a 100-year period, the RSS has created a Hindu electoral samaj: a coalition of upper castes, dominant castes, and disgruntled OBC and Dalits castes under the Hindutva ideology.

In Karnataka, the Sangh Parivar and its ideology now has its social base spanning the upper castes to the Madigas from the Dalit community. The Sangh has used the influence of mathas to consolidate smaller castes behind it. It has successfully targeted the new middle classes of oppressed communities and co-opted them. It has captured social organisations like academies and literary-cultural bodies. It has split the Dalit identity and mobilised the Madigas against the Congress and in favour of BJP.

The Sangh Parivar has successfully created a majority Hindu samaj in Karnataka. Unless a democratic samaj is built upon democratic values, this majority and hence Hindu rashtra cannot be broken.

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