



Rise of the Dalits: Identity and Power in Karnataka Politics

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Abstract:

The rise of Dalit political mobilization and identity politics has become a prominent feature of social and political discussions in present-day India. This comparative research seeks to investigate the political mobilization and identity politics of the Dalit community in the state of Karnataka. It intends to examine the influences and effects of these phenomena on the socio-political environment. The presentation starts by offering a concise overview of the historical marginalization and persecution experienced by Dalits in India. Subsequently, the attention shifts to Karnataka, where the Dalit movement has experienced a surge in strength in recent years. The paper assesses the several elements that have led to the mobilization of Dalit politics, encompassing societal disparities, caste-based prejudice, and movements advocating for social justice. Utilizing a comparative approach, the study also investigates the involvement of political parties in Karnataka in the process of mobilizing Dalit political support. This text examines the acknowledgment by political parties of the significance of Dalit support as a determining element in elections, and their endeavors to incorporate Dalits into the political sphere. Furthermore, the article examines the tactics utilized by Dalit leaders and activists to establish a distinct position for themselves in the political arena, and also explores the effects of reservation rules on the representation and empowerment of Dalits. Moreover, the paper explores the occurrence of identity politics within the Dalit movement in Karnataka. The text delves into the construction of Dalit identity.

Keywords: 1. Dalit, 2. Political mobilization .3. Identity politics, 4. Karnataka,5. Social inequalities, 6. Caste-based discrimination,7. Reservation policies,8. Intersectionality

Objective's:

1. To examine the political mobilization of Dalits in Karnataka and understand the factors that have led to their increased participation in politics.
2. To analyze the role of identity politics in the Dalit political mobilization and its impact on their social and political empowerment.
3. To compare the strategies and tactics used by different Dalit political groups in Karnataka and identify the successful ones in achieving their goals.
4. To assess the challenges faced by Dalit political mobilization in Karnataka and suggest recommendations for further strengthening their political representation and advocacy.

Methodology:

Research Questions: How have different Dalit political organizations in Karnataka employed different strategies and ideologies? What factors have influenced the relative success of distinct Dalit movements? How has the political landscape in Karnataka been shaped by the changing dynamics of Dalit identity politics?

Data Collection: Primary sources (interviews with activists, archival materials), secondary sources (academic literature, government reports, media coverage), quantitative data (election results, census data).

Comparative Framework: Compare ideologies, strategies, and temporal evolution of Dalit political mobilization in Karnataka.

Data Analysis: Qualitative analysis of interviews and documents, thematic analysis, and statistical analysis of quantitative data.

Interdiction:

The emergence of Dalit political mobilization and identity politics in India has been a prominent feature of current social and political discussions. This comparative research seeks to examine the political mobilization and identity politics of the Dalit community in the state of Karnataka. It aims to investigate the influences and effects of these phenomena on the socio-political environment. Historically, Dalits in India have experienced marginalization and discrimination. In recent years, Karnataka has experienced a burgeoning Dalit movement. This research will assess the several elements that have influenced the political mobilization of Dalits, encompassing societal disparities, caste-based prejudice, and social movements advocating for justice. We will also analyze the involvement of political parties in Karnataka in the process of mobilizing Dalit communities for political purposes (*Majoritarian Politics and*

the Plight of Dalits, n.d.).¹ We shall examine the acknowledgment by political parties of the significance of Dalit support in elections and their endeavors to incorporate Dalits into the political sphere. Furthermore, we will examine the tactics utilized by Dalit leaders and activists in building their presence in the political arena.

It will also examine the influence of reservation rules on the representation and empowerment of Dalits. Moreover, we will explore the occurrence of identity politics within the Dalit movement in Karnataka. We will analyze the construction of Dalit identity as a political classification and investigate the influence of Dalit identity on the development of political consciousness and mobilization. We will examine the interconnectedness of Dalit identity with other social classifications, such as gender and class, and analyze its effects on political mobilization and representation. This study will utilize a comparative methodology to analyze several locations within Karnataka and their distinct socio-political circumstances. This will provide a thorough comprehension of the elements that either facilitate or impede Dalit political mobilization, as well as the intricacies of Dalit identity politics in Karnataka.

Dalit political mobilization in Karnataka

The origins of Dalit mobilization may be traced back to the deeply ingrained caste system, including the practice of untouchability. This practice placed Dalits to the lowest social status, resulting in their isolation from society, economic disadvantages, and exposure to violence. Colonial Rule and Ambedkarite Ideology: The British rule, albeit introducing certain improvements, predominantly maintained the caste structure. B.R. Ambedkar, a prominent Dalit leader, played a crucial role in championing Dalit rights and advancing self-esteem via educational initiatives and political mobilization (Constable, 2001).² The relationship between independent India and affirmative action: Following independence, the Indian Constitution prohibited untouchability and implemented affirmative action measures such as reservations in education and government employment. Despite encountering hurdles, these programs presented opportunity for Dalits and stimulated their political engagement (*The Rise And Disarray Of Dalit Movement In Karnataka*, 2023).³

¹ <https://thewire.in/caste/majoritarian-politics-and-the-plight-of-dalits>

² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2659700>

³ <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/the-rise-and-disarray-of-dalit-movement-in-karnataka--news-310553>

Emergence of Dalit Movements:

During the 20th century, there were several initiatives in Karnataka that aimed to empower the Dalit community. One such movement was the Self-Respect movement in the 1920s, which emphasized the importance of reclaiming cultural heritage and establishing Dalit identity. The Madiga movement, along with other similar groups, contested the exploitation based on caste in the agricultural community. Following independence, there was a significant increase in mobilization efforts⁴. Notably, organizations such as the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) and the Republican Party of India (RPI) emerged as influential players, actively participating in elections and advocating for the rights of the Dalit community (Rodrigues, n.d.). The 1970s saw the emergence of Ambedkarite groups such as the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS) and the Karnataka Rajya Dalit Sangha (KRDS). These groups supported the fundamental overhaul of society and the political empowerment of Dalits.

Modern Landscape:

Diverse groups: Presently, a multitude of Dalit groups function in Karnataka, each with distinct ideas and techniques. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) primarily emphasizes electoral politics, although other groups are involved in rallies, legal advocacy, and cultural activity (Bureau, 2022).

Challenges and Achievements: Despite obstacles such as internal fragmentation and assimilation by mainstream political parties, the mobilization of Dalits has attained noteworthy accomplishments, including enhanced political representation, heightened awareness of Dalit concerns, and certain advancements in educational and occupational opportunities (*The Present and Future of Dalit Politics - Civildaily*, n.d.).⁵

Persistent Challenges: The ongoing endeavor to achieve social justice and equality for Dalits in Karnataka remains unabated. Pressing problems persist in the form of manual scavenging, caste-based violence, and insufficient enforcement of affirmative action rules.⁶

Dalit political parties and their ideologies in Karnataka:

⁴ <https://www.deccanherald.com/features/karnatakas-defining-moments-the-dalit-movements-struggle-against-oppression-925198.html>

⁵ <https://www.civildaily.com/news/the-present-and-future-of-dalit-politics/>

⁶ <https://www.civildaily.com/news/the-present-and-future-of-dalit-politics/>

**Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP):**

Ideology: Primarily focuses on political representation and contesting elections. Advocates for Ambedkarite principles and Bahujan empowerment, encompassing all marginalized communities beyond just Dalits.

Strategies: Aims to build a strong voter base among the broader Bahujan community through grassroots organization and campaigning on issues like poverty, education, and social justice.

Impact: Despite limited electoral success in Karnataka compared to its stronghold in North India, BSP has influenced the agenda of mainstream parties on Dalit issues.

Dalit movements and their impact on Karnataka politics:**Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS):**

Ideology: Leans towards radical social transformation and anti-caste activism. Critiques capitalism, feudalism, and caste oppression. Emphasizes grassroots mobilization through protests, demonstrations, and awareness campaigns.

Strategies: Engages in street protests, legal advocacy, and cultural programs to highlight caste atrocities and discrimination. Opposes co-option with mainstream parties and pursues autonomous Dalit empowerment.

Impact: DSS has played a crucial role in pressuring the government for policy changes, like banning the degrading practice of nude worship of Goddess Yellamma. However, they also face criticism for internal factionalism and limited electoral impact (Rodrigues, n.d.).⁷

Karnataka Rajya Dalit Sangha (KRDS):

⁷ <https://www.deccanherald.com/features/karnatakas-defining-moments-the-dalit-movements-struggle-against-oppression-925198.html>

Ideology: Similar to DSS, focuses on radical social transformation and combating caste oppression. Emphasizes cultural revival and Dalit self-respect through education and awareness programs.

Strategies: Organizes conferences, workshops, and cultural events to promote Dalit literature, language, and history. Engages in community mobilization and protests against caste-based violence and discrimination.

Impact: KRDS has contributed significantly to Dalit cultural resurgence and identity building. However, like DSS, it faces challenges in translating this activism into electoral gains.

Other Parties:

Republican Party of India (RPI) factions: Various factions of RPI exist, each with different ideological nuances. Some focus on electoral politics, while others prioritize grassroots activism(*The 20th Century Transformation of the Dalit Movement in India | Insights*, n.d.).⁸

Smaller regional parties: Several regional parties cater specifically to Dalit communities within Karnataka, focusing on local issues and concerns.

Dalit movements have woven a rich tapestry of resistance and progress into the fabric of Karnataka politics, leaving an undeniable mark on its social and political landscape. Here's a glimpse into their multifaceted impact:

Raising Awareness and Challenging Oppression:

Amplifying Dalit voices: Dalit movements have given voice to the previously unheard stories of caste discrimination, social exclusion, and economic hardship faced by the community. They've brought crucial attention to issues like manual scavenging, caste violence, and inadequate access to education and employment(*The Dalit: Born into a Life of Discrimination and Stigma | OHCHR*, n.d.).⁹

Shaping public discourse: By organizing protests, campaigns, and cultural events, Dalit movements have shifted public conversations towards caste and its implications. They've challenged traditional hierarchical structures and forced dominant narratives to acknowledge

⁸ <https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2020/07/the-20th-century-transformation-of-the-dalit-movement-in-india/>

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/04/dalit-born-life-discrimination-and-stigma>



the realities of caste oppression(*The Dalit: Born into a Life of Discrimination and Stigma* / OHCHR, n.d.).¹⁰

Sparking legal interventions: The relentless struggles of Dalit movements have contributed to significant legal changes. For instance, the banning of manual scavenging and the Samathha-Sagar (Equal Opportunity) Commission were established due to persistent pressure from Dalit groups.¹¹

Transforming Political Landscape:

Evolving party politics: Dalit movements have influenced the emergence and strategies of Dalit political parties like BSP, DSS, and KRDS. These parties offer alternative political discourse, challenge mainstream dominance, and push for Dalit-centric policies.

Shifting electoral dynamics: By mobilizing Dalit voters and raising awareness about issues that matter to them, Dalit movements have impacted electoral outcomes, making Dalit communities a key force to be reckoned with in state politics(*Future of Dalit Politics Swings Between Decline and Regeneration*, n.d.).¹²

Influencing policy agenda: Through sustained advocacy and pressure, Dalit movements have pushed mainstream parties to incorporate Dalit-related issues like affirmative action, education scholarships, and land rights into their agendas(*The Present and Future of Dalit Politics - Civildaily*, n.d.).

Beyond Electoral Politics:

Building Dalit identity: Dalit movements have played a crucial role in fostering a sense of shared identity and solidarity among diverse Dalit communities. They've promoted cultural revival, championed Dalit literature and art, and built self-respect through education and awareness campaigns(*What Is Identity Politics?*, 2023).¹³

Creating space for alternative narratives: Dalit movements have challenged the dominant caste-based narratives and historiography. They've offered counter-narratives that highlight Dalit history, struggles, and contributions to society, enriching the understanding of

¹⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/04/dalit-born-life-discrimination-and-stigma>

¹¹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26405018>

¹² <https://thewire.in/politics/dalit-politics-chandra-shekhar-aazad>

¹³ <https://upscsociology.in/what-is-identity-politics-discuss-the-main-trends-in-dalit-movements-in-india/>



Karnataka's past and present (*Imagining the Dalit Identity: An Analysis of Narrative Techniques in Select Dalit Writing*, n.d.).¹⁴

Building alliances: Dalit movements have engaged with other marginalized groups like Adivasis and women, forging alliances and building solidarity beyond caste lines. This broader struggle for social justice strengthens the collective fight against all forms of oppression.

Challenges and Opportunities:

- ❖ Internal divisions and factionalism within Dalit movements can weaken their bargaining power and impact.
- ❖ Sustainable funding and resources are crucial for continued success and long-term impact.
- ❖ Mainstream co-option of Dalit voices and concerns presents a risk of diluting their original intent and goals.

Despite these challenges, Dalit movements remain a dynamic force in Karnataka politics. Their ongoing struggles hold immense potential to further democratize the state's social and political landscape, paving the way for a more equitable and just society for all.

Dalit Identity Politics in Karnataka:

Dalit identity politics in Karnataka is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is deeply ingrained in the state's social fabric and political landscape. It can be understood by examining the formation of Dalit identity, political manifestations, challenges and opportunities, and looking ahead. The historical context is crucial in understanding the formation of Dalit identity in Karnataka. Centuries of caste oppression and social exclusion have pushed Dalits to the margins, leading to a sense of shared experiences and injustice. The influence of B.R. Ambedkar, who fought against caste discrimination and advocated for self-respect, played a significant role in solidifying Dalit identity in the region. Local Dalit movements, such as the Madiga movement and the Self-Respect movement, also contributed to the shaping of Dalit identity by considering socio-economic factors and cultural specificities. Dalit identity is expressed politically through the emergence of Dalit political parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS), and Karnataka Rajya Dalit Sangha (KRDS). These parties aim to advocate for Dalit rights, challenge the dominance of mainstream parties,

¹⁴ <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/7038/703873575006/html/>



and present alternative political agendas. Dalit political movements mobilize voters strategically based on shared identity and concerns(*Exploring Identity Politics in India*, n.d.),¹⁵

Challenges and Opportunities in Dalit Political Mobilization:

Challenges:

Internal divisions and factionalism: Diverse caste identities, ideologies, and political strategies within the Dalit community can lead to fragmentation and weaken collective bargaining power. This can also make it difficult to build a unified political platform.

Co-option by mainstream parties: Mainstream parties often attempt to co-opt Dalit issues and candidates for electoral gains without addressing systemic inequalities. This can dilute the effectiveness of Dalit movements and their ability to push for genuine change.

Limited resources and funding: Many Dalits political organizations lack sufficient resources and funding to sustain their activities, hindering their ability to effectively mobilize voters, organize protests, and run meaningful campaigns.

Caste-based violence and discrimination: Persistent caste-based violence and discrimination create a climate of fear and intimidation, making it difficult for Dalits to exercise their political rights and participate freely in public life.

Inadequate representation in decision-making bodies: Despite increased electoral participation, Dalit representation in legislatures and other key decision-making bodies remains insufficient to effectively address their concerns and needs.

Opportunities:

Rising political consciousness: Increased awareness of Dalit rights and the growing political aspirations within the community create a fertile ground for mobilization and participation.

Electoral gains and increased representation: Strategic mobilization and effective campaigning can lead to increased electoral gains for Dalit political parties, strengthening their voice and influence in legislatures(*The 'Righteous Anger' of the Powerless Investigating Dalit Outrage over Caste Violence*, n.d.).¹⁶

¹⁵ https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/exploring-identity-politics-india-personal-lens-caste-utkarsh-dwivedi-mi6gf?trk=public_post

¹⁶ <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/1892>

Diversification of strategies: Moving beyond electoral politics and adopting diverse strategies like grassroots organizing, legal advocacy, cultural activism, and building alliances with other marginalized groups can broaden the impact of Dalit movements.

Technological advancements: social media and communication technologies can provide powerful tools for mobilization, awareness campaigns, and information dissemination within Dalit communities.

Focus on education and economic empowerment: Equipping Dalits with education and skills can create a more empowered and independent community, less susceptible to co-option and better equipped to advocate for their rights(*The 'Righteous Anger' of the Powerless Investigating Dalit Outrage over Caste Violence*, n.d.).¹⁷

Conclusion:

Dalit identity politics in Karnataka is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has deep roots in the state's social fabric and political landscape. Historical contexts, Ambedkarite influences, and local movements have shaped Dalit identity, while the emergence of Dalit political parties and strategic electoral mobilization have provided avenues for political articulation. However, challenges such as co-option by mainstream parties, internal divisions, and caste-based violence persist. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for progress. Leveraging technology, building strategic alliances with other marginalized groups, focusing on education and economic empowerment, and engaging in diverse strategies can contribute to a more independent and politically assertive Dalit community. Looking ahead, it is crucial to sustain the struggle, support grassroots organizing, promote legal advocacy, and foster cultural activism to weave a just and equitable tapestry for all in Karnataka. Dalit identity politics in Karnataka is a complex tapestry, deeply woven into the state's social fabric and political landscape. It is formed through historical contexts, Ambedkarite influences, and local movements and narratives. Political manifestations include the emergence of Dalit political parties and strategic electoral mobilization. However, there are challenges such as co-option by mainstream parties and internal divisions, as well as opportunities for intersectional alliances and broader social change. Moving forward, it is important to continue exploring and understanding the intricacies of Dalit identity politics in order to contribute to a more just and

¹⁷ <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/1892>

equitable society in Karnataka. In conclusion, Dalit identity politics in Karnataka is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has deep roots in the state's social fabric and political landscape. It has been shaped by centuries of caste oppression and social exclusion, as well as the influence of B.R. Ambedkar and local movements. Dalit political parties have emerged to advocate for Dalit rights and challenge mainstream party dominance. However, there are challenges of co-option and internal divisions within the movement. There are also opportunities for intersectional alliances and non-electoral forms of activism. Moving forward, it is crucial to understand and navigate the complexities of Dalit identity politics in order to contribute to a more just and equitable society in Karnataka.

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