

**TURNING KARNATAKA *SAFFRON*: EXPLAINING THE SUCCESS OF
BJP IN KARNATAKA**

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The national dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India is built on its electoral strength in the states of the Hindi belt. However, Karnataka in the south has also emerged as a stronghold of the BJP. This is puzzling considering the BJP's ideological lineage as a pro-Hindi party and traditional support base consisting mainly of upper castes. To achieve electoral success in Karnataka, the BJP had to surmount the challenge posed by a strong Kannada subnationalism and expand its social support base beyond the upper castes. By tapping into Kannada subnationalism's affinity with Hindu cultural elements, the BJP legitimised its Hindu nationalist ideology. Moreover, it exploited the adversarial attitude of Kannada subnationalism towards linguistic outgroups to construct the Muslim other. Further, the BJP managed to expand its social support base by offering leadership positions to Lingayats and forging close ties with influential Lingayat *mathas*. The religio-cultural activities of Sangh Parivar played a key role in acquiring the support of non-dominant OBC castes in coastal Karnataka. This thesis seeks to contribute to the comparative study of the BJP by developing a framework for the analysis of its politics in the non-Hindi states.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Hindu nationalist¹ Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)², led by Narendra Modi, has emerged as the new dominant party in India (Palshikar 2019; Chhibber and Verma 2019). BJP won an outright parliamentary majority in the general elections of 2014, a feat no party had achieved since 1984. BJP increased its majority in the 2019 parliamentary elections, winning 303 out of 543 seats, while its main rival, the Congress party, came a distant second winning only 52 seats. The national dominance of BJP is built on its electoral strength in the states of the Hindi belt, the northern region of India where Hindi, the most spoken language of India, is the lingua franca (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2015). In 2019, BJP won nearly 59% of its seats from the Hindi belt states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Jharkhand. It swept the elections in these states winning about 79% of the seats in the region. Another state swept by BJP in 2019 was Karnataka, a state located in the southern region of India. In Karnataka, BJP polled 51.4% of the votes and won 25 out of 28 parliamentary seats – a staggering success rarely seen in the state since 1989.

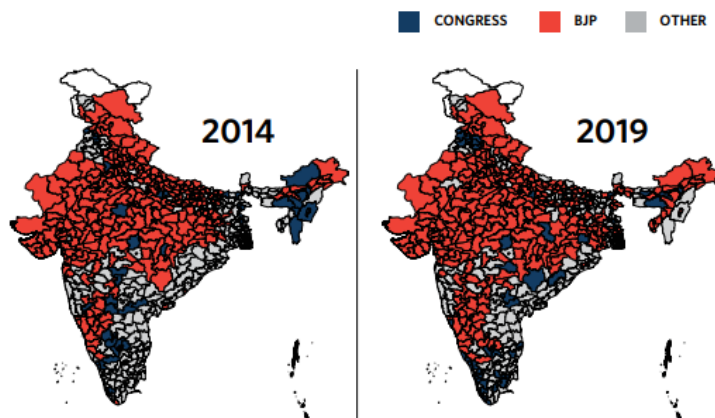


Figure 1. 1: Parliamentary seats won by BJP, Congress, and others in 2014 and 2019 general elections.

¹ Hindu nationalism refers to a belief that national identity and politics in India should be organised according to the values of Hindu religion (Brown, McLean, and McMillan 2018a).

² Literally, “Indian People’s Party”

Karnataka's emergence as a stronghold of BJP is remarkable when one considers the ideological heritage and traditional social base of BJP. BJP espouses the ideology of *Hindutva* (literally, "Hinduness") which provides the cultural justification for Hindu nationalism by emphasising the "common culture" of the people of Indian subcontinent (Gregory et al. 2011; Brown, McLean, and McMillan 2018b)³. This ideology was first codified by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his tract *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* published in 1923 (Jaffrelot 1998). Savarkar highlighted the role of language, alongside rituals and social rules, in undergirding a common Hindu culture. According to him, Sanskrit is a "language par excellence" which is the common reference point for all Indian languages. This belief prompted Hindu nationalists after Savarkar to demand the recognition of Sanskrit or Hindi – the language which is closest to it – as the national language (Jaffrelot 2007). One of those strident advocates was Madhav Golwalkar. He was an influential Hindu nationalist ideologue who led Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (lit. "National Volunteer Organisation") for more than 30 years from 1940 to 1973. RSS, which was founded in 1925 by Keshav Hedgewar, has been instrumental in propagating Hindu nationalism and BJP is seen as its political wing (Ellis-Petersen 2022). Golwalkar, like Savarkar, asserted, with little historical or linguistic basis, that Sanskrit is the language of all Hindus since all the other Indian languages were dialects derived from it⁴ (Chatterjee 2022). He, therefore, demanded Sanskrit or Hindi to be made the sole official language of India⁵ (Golwalkar 1968). Moreover, RSS under his leadership strongly opposed the creation of states on linguistic basis as demanded by popular

³ Hindutva has emerged as the dominant form of Hindu nationalism and therefore, the terms Hindutva and Hindu nationalism are used interchangeably in this thesis.

⁴ This claim has no factual basis. Sanskrit belongs to Indo-European language family, whereas most of the south Indian languages, which developed independently, belong to Dravidian language family.

⁵ Currently, Hindi is the official language of India's union government, with English acting as the associate official language.

movements in south India. Not only that, Golwalkar was actually opposed to the principle of federalism itself and instead called for rewriting of Indian Constitution to create a unitary and centralised state (Chatterjee 2022). Suffice to note, these views were contrary to the popular view in Karnataka, where language-based subnational identity had firmly taken root.

Golwalkar's views on caste too were controversial. He maintained that the caste system⁶ had provided a firm basis for Hindu society. According to him, in regions such as East Bengal where the caste order was weak, there was mass conversion to Islam. In comparison, in regions where it was strong, such as northern India, despite many centuries of Islamic rule, the conversion rate was low (Chatterjee 2022). His eulogy of a hierarchical social order which privileged the upper castes⁷ was a liability in Karnataka, where the Non-Brahmin Movement led by Lingayat and Vokkaliga organisations had resulted in the establishment of reservation⁸ in government jobs for members of backward communities (Shastry 2023).

By 1967, the predecessor of BJP, Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS)⁹, which operated in close cooperation with RSS, had emerged as a significant political force in north India on the back of support from the upper castes (Verma 2019). The ideological orientation premised on upper caste values, apparent in Golwalkar's views on the caste system, and championing of socially and economically conservative policies were among major reasons for drawing upper caste support to BJS (Chhibber 1997). In Hindi heartland states of north India, like Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, the electoral strength of upper castes – Brahmin, Baniya and Rajput castes in particular – was higher compared to that in Karnataka, and they dominated

⁶ The division of society into numerous endogamous castes and sub-castes organised in hierarchical order.

⁷ Whenever “upper castes” are mentioned in this thesis, it generally refers to Brahmins, the priestly castes, and to a lesser extent Baniyas (the merchant castes) and Rajputs (the warrior castes).

⁸ Reservation is a policy of positive discrimination in India wherein a certain proportion of government jobs or seats in public educational institutions are “reserved” for candidates from socially and educationally backward classes (generally lower castes).

⁹ Literally, “Indian People's Organisation”.

politics in these states (Gupta 2009). However, greater reliance on support from these upper castes was not a winnable strategy in Karnataka. Moreover, the monopoly of Brahmins in the public service had been challenged in the princely state of Mysore¹⁰ in the 1910s by the mobilisation of backward classes for a share in power and public sector employment (Milton 2018).

1.1 Research Question

To succeed in Karnataka, the BJP had to surmount two formidable challenges. First, its ideological inclination favouring Hindi and greater centralisation of power in the union government was antithetical to the subnationalism and subnational identity which had developed in Karnataka around language pride and support for federalism. Second, BJP's rise in the northern states had been fuelled by the solid support from upper castes – Brahmin, Baniya, and Rajput castes chiefly. However, BJP could not rely only on its traditional social base to succeed electorally in Karnataka as the significance of these upper castes was considerably low, both politically and demographically, in the state. Yet, BJP has successfully managed to emerge as the primary competitor of the grand old Congress party in Karnataka. Therefore, this thesis is motivated by the following research question:

How did the BJP, with its limiting ideological orientation and traditional social base, become electorally successful in Karnataka?

By identifying conditions and strategies which helped the BJP to entrench its electoral position in the state, this thesis aims to advance the knowledge of the BJP and its Hindu nationalist politics in India.

¹⁰ The present-day state of Karnataka was formed in 1956 by uniting the princely state of Mysore with other Kannada speaking regions. The state was known as “Mysore” until 1973, when it was named “Karnataka”.

1.2 The Argument

The emergence of BJP as an electoral force in Karnataka was puzzling considering the incongruence between the ideological and political antecedents of the BJP and the political compulsions in Karnataka. BJS, the forerunner of BJP, advocated for a unitarian state with Hindi forming the linguistic basis for a common cultural identity (Kailash 2021). These ideas ran counter to a strong subnational identity linked to Kannada language¹¹, which had catalysed the formation of the unified Karnataka state. Moreover, the electoral success of BJS, and later BJP, in the northern states had mainly been due to a strong support from the upper castes. However, the upper castes did not have the same demographic weight in Karnataka to tilt the electoral balance in BJP's favour. To overcome these limitations, BJP adopted strategies aimed at subnational and caste identities.

First, the BJP and its allies sought to tap into the cultural aspects of Kannada subnationalism closely aligned with the Hindu religion to propagate the ideas of Hindu nationalism (Shivasundar 2022b). Further, they exploited the existential fears of Kannada activists to communalise¹² the movement for the protection of Kannada language. This sometimes culminated in anti-Muslim violence as seen during the anti-Urdu agitations in Bangalore in 1994 (Nair 1994; Engineer 1994). In other words, the intimate relationship between the Kannada subnationalism and Hindu cultural ideas and symbols created favourable conditions for the legitimacy and success of BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology and politics.

Second, BJP needed strategies to expand its social base of support to achieve electoral success in Karnataka. Over time, BJP has been able to acquire strong support from a

¹¹ Kannada is the most spoken and the official language of Karnataka.

¹² In India, "communalism" refers to religious sectarianism. In other words, it refers to the pursuit of socially divisive policy/practice (Pritam Singh 2015). To "communalise" means to create sectarian divisions.

politically dominant caste group, called Lingayat¹³, and also from some non-dominant¹⁴ backward castes like Billavas in the coastal Karnataka region. Lingayats, one of the two politically dominant castes in Karnataka, had been alienated by the policies and politics of the Congress party as it attempted to consolidate its support among the non-dominant lower castes, and socially and economically weaker sections of society. BJP acquired Lingayat support by providing leadership positions to Lingayat leaders, thus becoming a vehicle for Lingayat aspirations for power. They consolidated their Lingayat support base by developing strong connections with Lingayat *mathas*¹⁵ and seers. Their ties ranged from offering state patronage to involving Lingayat elites in the Hindu nationalist organisations and programmes (Desai 2019; Shivasundar 2023). In the coastal belt of Karnataka, *Sangh Parivar*¹⁶, the loose confederation of various Hindu nationalist organisations acting in close association with the RSS, assiduously cultivated the support of other backward classes (OBCs) like Billavas. They achieved this by situating the origin myth and the cultural symbols of these castes in the Hindu mythology and scriptures, in order to evoke a homogenising religious pride. Moreover, they used Hindu religious festivals to construct a Hindu nationalist identity (Kuthar 2020b; 2020a; Assadi 2002). This embedded Hindu nationalist identity was invoked to build a social coalition in favour of BJP and its Hindu nationalist causes.

The title of this thesis – “turning Karnataka *saffron*” – refers to these strategies of communalising the subnational identity and appropriating lower caste identities in the Hindu nationalist movement. Since the colour saffron is associated with the Hindu nationalist movement, it has also come to symbolise the attempts to communalise various aspects of social and political life. Thus, the strategies of BJP to exploit the link between Kannada

¹³ Lingayatism emerged as a religious reform movement in opposition to the hierarchical Hindu religion in the 12th century CE (Shivasundar 2023).

¹⁴ “Non-dominant” refers to their traditional lower status in Karnataka society and polity.

¹⁵ A matha is a monastic institution. Generally, each caste/sub-caste has its own matha/mathas.

¹⁶ Sangh Parivar literally means “the family of RSS”. It refers to the various Hindu nationalist organisations, including BJP, which act in close association with the RSS.

identity and Hindu cultural beliefs, and to construct an embedded Hindu nationalist identity by appropriating lower caste identities could be aptly described as attempts to turn Karnataka saffron.

This thesis shines a light not only on how BJP achieved electoral success in Karnataka but also on its challenges in the state. BJP has tempered the tension between Hindu nationalism and the Kannada subnational identity by tapping into Kannada subnationalism's affinity with Hindu cultural elements. However, when BJP pushes a unitarian and pro-Hindi agenda at the centre, the contradictions of its politics in the state stand out in sharp relief. Similarly, there is a tension between the politics of appropriation of lower caste identities in a brahmanical conception of Hindu nationalist identity and the politics of social justice which attacks the hierarchical social order preserved by brahmanism¹⁷. Foregrounding these tensions may offer BJP's opponents the most potent weapon to challenge BJP's march in Karnataka. Moreover, this thesis also offers cues to further investigate BJP's electoral success or lack thereof in the other states, particularly in South India.

1.3 Research Methodology

The objective of this thesis is to conduct an intensive study of BJP's politics in Karnataka. Therefore, a single case study has been conducted. This case study is qualitative in nature. However, the data from the state legislative assembly elections in Karnataka and the pre- and post-poll opinion surveys conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, have been utilised in the analysis. The explanation offered for the exceptional success of BJP in Karnataka has been generated through careful secondary

¹⁷ Brahmanism refers to the sociopolitical ideology that embeds a vision of an ideal past and a future society where Brahmins occupy the top position, acting as the unique guardians of the spiritual sphere and the only sources of knowledge on almost all practical aspects of life (Bhargava 2019). In other words, it is an ideology which promotes Brahmin supremacy.

research of academic and non-academic literature on BJP. Where relevant newspaper reports, political speeches, and party literature have also been used to substantiate and enrich the arguments. Finally, the utilisation of academic literature on Kannada literature and literary criticisms in the examination of Kannada subnationalism is a distinctive feature of this thesis.

1.4 Chapter Plan

The chapters are arranged as follows. Chapter 2 will present a review of the academic literature on the BJP in Karnataka, along with a discussion of the research methodology and key definitions. Chapter 3 will focus on the politics of BJP and discuss its origin and views on two key issues, such as, the language policy and federalism. Chapter 4 will introduce the society and politics in Karnataka, emphasising the caste relations and key political players. It will also discuss a brief history of the Karnataka unification movement, which played a critical role in shaping the Kannada subnational identity. The analysis of BJP's electoral success in Karnataka will be presented in the Chapter 5. This analysis will illuminate how BJP overcame its limitations to find acceptance in Karnataka polity and expand its social support base. Chapter 6 will offer conclusion and spotlight the avenues for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW, METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

2.1 Literature Review

The case of BJP in Karnataka has gained wider scholarly attention since 2008, when BJP emerged as the single largest party and formed the government on its own for the first time in Karnataka. Various explanations have been offered for its success in the state, which is unlike its strongholds, both demographically and ideologically, in the Hindi belt. Two major strands of analysis can be identified in the academic literature.

The first of these is characterised by a focus on BJP's traditional strategy of communal polarisation (e.g., see Bhattacharjee 2020). They highlight how BJP and other Hindu nationalist organisations foment and use communal violence to produce communal polarisation. Sanjal Shastri (2023, 45) has notes that "electoral competition is closely connected to communal violence". In a similar vein, Mehta (2024a) has noted how BJP wins in constituencies with substantial Muslim population. While these studies offer crucial insights on the modus operandi of Hindu nationalist organisations, they do not consider why a strong subnational identity has failed to counter the exclusivist Hindu nationalist ideology and politics.

The other strand of analysis points to the change in party system of the state and the subsequent realignment of social bases of support (e.g., see Kailash 2017; Chiriyankandath 2018; Mehta 2024; Assadi 2009). They generally argue that the splits in the Congress party and later in its rival, the Janata Party, initiated a change in the party system and destabilised their social bases of support. As Lingayats, an electorally and demographically significant caste group, shifted away from these parties, BJP acquired their support by offering leadership positions, and through strategic coalition building with splinter groups of the Congress and Janata Parties (Sridharan 2005; Heath 1999). While these are perceptive explanations, they do not incorporate the ideological and community outreach activities of

BJP to cobble up a diverse coalition of support. Therefore, this thesis goes beyond just these explanations to highlight the ties BJP forged with Lingayat mathas (religious institutions), and the involvement of youths from small backward castes like Billavas in the Hindu nationalist cultural programmes in the coastal Karnataka.

Besides, other explanations of BJP's success in Karnataka have focussed on niche aspects. For example, Chidambaram (2012) has argued that the provision of welfare services by the RSS-affiliated organisations in the poorer neighbourhoods of Bengaluru in Karnataka has deepened their influence in these areas. Misra (2018), on the other hand, has highlighted the superior organisational structure election management for BJP's success in Karnataka. Although these are significant contributions to understanding the politics of BJP, this thesis argues that their success in Karnataka must address two fundamental issues: first, how was the ideology of Hindu nationalism, which was developed in the North and Western India, made compatible with the mores of Karnataka, characterised by a strong subnational identity. Second, how did BJP shed its upper caste image to broaden its support base in Karnataka.

This thesis contributes to the growing corpus of studies on BJP in Karnataka in two ways. First, it puts Kannada subnationalism at the centre of analysis. In a state with strong subnational identity, it is necessary to understand how this might have helped or hindered BJP. Second, it develops a framework for the analysis of the electoral success/failure of the BJP, particularly in states beyond the Hindi belt. This framework includes the analysis of subnational and caste identities and how BJP negotiated them. Adopting such a framework has the potential to guide many insightful comparative studies of BJP.

2.2 Research Methodology

The objective of this thesis is to explain how the BJP achieved electoral success in Karnataka, a state dissimilar to its strongholds in the Hindi belt. Therefore, a single case

study has been conducted for this thesis with the subnational state of Karnataka being the unit of analysis. The choice to study a single case – Karnataka – has allowed using “less abstract concepts that are more grounded in the specific contexts under scrutiny” ((Landman 2002, 893). Therefore, subnationalism, communalism and Brahmanism features prominently in the analysis. Moreover, a single case study provides an opportunity for an intensive examination of the case (Landman 2008). However, on the flip side, single case studies are “less extensive” and have a lower level of abstraction (ibid., 86). Nevertheless, they do perform critical functions as discussed below.

Landman (2002, 912–13) identifies two key functions performed by single case studies. One, providing important contextual description upon which other studies can build their analyses. Two, they develop new classifications that are useful for comparison. As a single case study, this thesis provides useful contextual description – especially highlighting the evolution and particular features of Kannada subnationalism – which could inform future comparative studies in the field. In addition, even though no new classification is proposed in this thesis, it provides a framework that can support future comparative studies on the BJP’s politics in Indian states. This framework involves examining the subnational and caste identities of the state and analysing how BJP negotiated with them. The success of BJP depends on making these identities compatible with the Hindu nationalist ideology and politics.

While this study is primarily based on secondary research of academic and non-academic literature on BJP, it also makes use of relevant newspaper reports, political speeches, and party propaganda to support the arguments presented here. Additionally, academic literature on Kannada literature and literary criticism has been extensively used to investigate the nature of Kannada subnationalism. Last but not the least, the data from the state legislative assembly elections in Karnataka and the pre- and post-poll opinion surveys

conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, have been utilised to inform, substantiate, and enrich the analysis.

2.2.1 Limitations

Lokniti-CSDS has a rich repository of election study datasets with many interesting socio-economic and political variables. However, they do not provide full access to these datasets, and only provide cross-tabulations of requested combination of variables. Moreover, in most cases, the access to data is not affordable without any external funding. Besides, there are few organisations of repute conducting similar surveys. These issues present significant challenges to conducting quantitative analysis.

Furthermore, no opinion poll data are available for Karnataka assembly elections before 2008. Consequently, there is no caste-wise vote share data available for Karnataka before 2008. This is a significant impediment in studying how the social support base of political parties in Karnataka changed over the years.

2.3 Definitions

The definitions of the key terms used in this thesis are as follows:

Subnationalism: Following Prerna Singh (2015, 507), the subnationalism is defined as the ideology and movement arising out of “a sense of identification with, or aspirations for, a self-governing homeland”. As Singh elaborates, (ibid.) “people with a belief in a shared past and a common culture ... identify with or desire the creation of and control over a political administrative unit that corresponds to a historic homeland,” often based on language. It is distinguished from nationalism because “subnations either explicitly aspire to have or are willing to settle for a political administrative unit within a sovereign state” (ibid.). There are four attributes associated with such a subnationalism. First, the existence of a single, common

and distinctive language (ibid., 514). Second, the history of mobilisation in favour of creation of the state (ibid., 516). Third, absence of separatist movements (ibid.). And lastly, the presence of subnationalist parties or organisations. As the subsequent discussions will make clear, Kannada subnationalism fulfils each of these criteria.

Communalism: Ludden (1996, 1) defined communalism as the “antagonistic mobilization of one religious community against another” (as cited in Jayaram 2000). Such a mobilisation is usually seen in competitive struggle for wealth, status, or power. Communalism places “group membership over national identity” (Lewis 1993, 10). Communalism and communal polarisation are hallmarks of Hindu nationalist politics in India. This thesis explores how BJP’s communalism interacted with Kannada subnationalism in Karnataka.

3. BJP: ORIGIN AND IDEOLOGY

Although BJP was founded in 1980, its actual lineage traces further back. To fully understand its ideological outlook, politics and close ties with other Hindu nationalist organisations, the discussion must start in 1920s, when V. D. Savarkar codified Hindu nationalism as it is known today in his tract *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*

3.1 Origin

The failure of Khilafat movement in 1920s, in which the Indian Muslims demonstrated against the British rulers for deposing the Ottoman Sultan, and the subsequent riots in the country, sparked a Hindu reaction (Jaffrelot 2007, 13). This reaction took the shape of Hindu nationalism, whose ideology was codified by Savarkar, a Chitpavan Brahmin from Maharashtra. He advanced the idea that “Hindus are the indigenous people of the subcontinent” and they form a nation ((Lewis 1993, 24). He identified four criteria for the Hindu nation: identification with the Hindu religion, a sacred territory described in the *Vedas* (ancient Hindu scriptures), descent from the indigenous “Vedic Fathers”, and Sanskrit – or Hindi, which is closest to it – as the common language (Jaffrelot 2007, 14). This established the archetypal Hindu nationalist slogan – “Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan” (ibid.).

This ideology inspired the founding Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (lit. “National Volunteer Organisation”) by K. B. Hedgewar, a Telugu Brahmin from Maharashtra, in 1925. He believed that only Hindus could win India’s freedom, and for that, “Hindu youth had to be organised on the basis of personal character and absolute love of the motherland” (Lewis 1993, 23-24). In reaction to the growth of militant Islam, the network of RSS branches expanded to most parts of India in the 1930s, achieving particular success in north India. Its recruits mostly came from urban, upper caste, and middle-class background (ibid., 24). After the partition of India in 1947, they also found much support among the refugees

from Pakistan (ibid., 25). M. S. Golwalkar succeeded Hedgewar as the head of RSS after his death in 1940. Golwalkar expressed his views in his book *We or Our Nationhood Defined*: “non-Hindus...must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in this country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges,...not even citizen’s right.” (ibid., 26). After Gandhi, the leader of India’s independence, was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist in 1948, RSS was banned in India until July 1949.

After the ban was lifted, RSS set up a wide array of affiliated organisations within different sectors of Indian society, including a student union and a trade union, “as a means of infusing Hindu nationalist values into public life” (Jaffrelot 1998, 115). Although Golwalkar envisioned an advisory and consultative role for the RSS, some *swayamsevak*s (volunteers) thought that they should be directly involved in politics (ibid.). They joined hands with S. P. Mookerjee to initiate a party called “Bharatiya Jana Sangh” (BJS) (lit. “Indian People’s Organisation”) in 1951. Articulating the programmes of this new party, the editor of RSS’s mouthpiece, *Organiser*, wrote that Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) can be the only principle for the reorganisation of Hindustan and to combat communism (Lewis 1993, 28). The eight-point programme adopted by the BJS included the agenda of developing a single “Bharatiya” (Indian) culture (ibid.). The BJS’s support base mirrored the RSS’s social base – the upper castes comprising of Brahmins, Baniyas and Kshatriyas from the middle class background (ibid.). BJS’s failure to attract supporters from diverse social and economic background limited its electoral performance. Territorially, too, it had become a party of the Hindi belt, with limited appeal outside. However, with the decline of the Congress party, BJS made major gains in the national and state elections of 1967 in the northern states of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Haryana (ibid.).

When Indira Gandhi imposed an authoritarian “emergency” rule in India in 1975, RSS and BJS were forced to join the resistance movement to restore India’s democracy. In

1977, all the opposition parties, including the BJS, decided to merge their parties to form the “Janata Party” (lit. “People’s Party”) to fight the upcoming elections. Subsequently, the Janata Party defeated the Congress party in the parliamentary election of 1977 and formed the next government. Three erstwhile BJS members were inducted into the union cabinet.

Janata Party was a motley collection of politicians from different persuasions – from socialists to Hindu nationalists – united by the common goal to defeat Indira Gandhi’s Congress Party. Soon however, fissures emerged, and the dual membership of the erstwhile BJS members in both the RSS and Janata Party was bitterly opposed by their rival faction, leading to the break-up of Janata Party in 1979 (Lewis 1993). Thus emerged the BJP in 1980. In the beginning, BJP attempted to adopt a more centrist position. It placed special emphasis on communal harmony and avowed to protect the life and properties of minorities (ibid., 39). However, the lack of electoral success and the increasing criticism from their cadres, forced BJP to jettison the “moderate” image and fully embrace Hindu nationalism. BJP president L. K. Advani’s Rath Yatra (lit. “pilgrimage on a chariot”), and the party’s espousal of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement (lit. “the movement for Lord Ram’s birthplace”) to construct a temple in the place of a disputed medieval mosque, was a turning point in Indian politics. The resultant growth in communalism in Indian society fuelled the surge in support for BJP at the poll.

3.2 Views on Key Issues

The views of the BJP and its predecessor on two key issues – the language policy and federalism – will be discussed here. Kannada subnationalism strongly advocated for policies promoting Kannada interests and federalism. Therefore, Hindu nationalism’s insistence on Hindi and a unitary state presented significant challenges to the BJP.

3.2.1 Language policy

In sync with the Golwalkar's demand for "One Country, One People, One Culture, One Nation and One Ideal", Hindu nationalists demanded adopting Hindi as the national language. In the view of Hindutva, political unity could only be sustained by establishing Hindi as the common language, facilitating communication not just between the central government and the states, but also among the states themselves (Bhattacharjee 2020). In fact, BJS denounced the territorial reorganisation of Indian states along linguistic lines in 1956 and blamed it for the rise of "subnationalisms" (Jaffrelot 2007). They passed a party resolution in 1954 demanding that steps be taken for "the adoption of Devnagari as the common script for all Indian languages" (ibid.). They also demanded that Hindi alone should be the medium for post-graduate and specialised scientific studies in India (ibid.).

Over the years, however, as they sought to expand their political footprint across India, they recognised that their "Hindi only" position was an impediment, particularly in the south (Jaffrelot 2007). They refused to establish a deadline for making Hindi the national language, emphasizing that its adoption should be voluntary (ibid.) Despite tempering down their rhetoric on Hindi, critics continue to accuse them of pursuing the Hindi promotion agenda (see e.g., Pande 2015). Further, in non-Hindi speaking states like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, language-based organisations continue to view BJP as pro-Hindi (Ranjan 2021, 331). Therefore, how the BJP found acceptance in Karnataka polity, which has a strong sense of subnationalism, is of particular interest. This will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 5.

3.2.2 Federalism and reorganisation of states

Savarkar's party, Hindu Mahasabha, proclaimed that "Hindustan was one homogeneous country" and that the states were merely administrative units (Bhattacharjee

2020). Golwalkar too was unambiguous in his opinion on federalism. As a votary of “one country, one society and one nation”, he asserted that “it is natural that the affairs of the nation are governed through a single state of the unitary type” (Golwalkar 1980[1966]: 224; as cited in Bhattacharjee 2020). In the first election manifesto of BJS in 1951, described India as “The whole of Bharatvarsha, from Himalayas to Kanyakumari, is and has been, through the ages, a living organic whole – geographically, culturally and historically”, emphasising the unitary character of the state (ibid.). In later years, however, BJP’s views on federalism became ambiguous (Adeney 2005). Adeney (2005) observes that the compulsion to forge alliances with regional parties and the aspiration to expand beyond the Hindi belt may have forced it adopt a “pragmatic view”. How the BJP convinced Karnataka voters that they are not inimical to their state’s interests, despite their ambivalence on federalism, is an issue that will be taken up in Chapter 5.

4. KARNATAKA: UNIFICATION, SOCIETY AND POLITICS

Karnataka is one of the five southern states in India. Before the state was officially renamed as Karnataka¹⁸ in 1973, it was called Mysore, after the princely state of the same name. The state's capital and largest city is Bengaluru¹⁹, located in the southern part of the state (see Appendix A). Kannada is the most spoken and the official language of the state. Territorially, Karnataka is the largest state in south India. However, during the colonial period, this territory was divided and distributed across 19 different administrations (Rajasekhariah, Jayaramu, and Jayraj 1987). The growth of Kannada subnationalism played a critical part in unifying these territories and evolving a Kannada subnational identity. Understanding Kannada subnationalism is crucial for grasping Karnataka's history and politics.

4.1 The History of Karnataka Unification

The territorial fragmentation followed the defeat of Tipu Sultan by the British East India Company in 1799 (Nair 2011). The British carved up the region for strategic and administrative reasons. Over the course of the 19th century, nineteen different administrative units assumed control over various areas of the region. Of them, two were the most influential for the development of Kannada subnationalism, literature, and culture – the Bombay Presidency and the princely state of Mysore (Manor 1979). Marathi was the official language of the Bombay Presidency, whereas it was Kannada in Mysore. The Kannada speaking region under the Bombay Presidency consisted of four large districts: Dharwad,

¹⁸ For the sake of clarity, the state will be referred to Karnataka even while discussing the period before 1973.

¹⁹ Until 2006, it was known as Bangalore. In this thesis, it will be referred to as Bengaluru even while discussing the pre-2006 period.

Belgaum, Bijapur and North Canara. This region was collectively known as Bombay Karnataka (see Appendix B).

The cultural, economic, and educational domination of Kannada speaking people living under the non-Kannada administrations had sown the seed of Kannada subnationalism. Dharwad emerged as the “nerve-centre” of the *Karnataka Ekikarana Chaluvali* (lit. Karnataka unification movement) (Devadevan and Naregal 2020). *Karnataka Vidyavarrdhak Sangha* (KVS) (lit. “the organisation for the promotion of education in Karnataka”) was established in Dharwad 1890 to support the development of Kannada language and culture, and to promote the idea of Karnataka unification (Rajasekhariah, Jayaramu, and Jayraj 1987). It took up the issue of teaching Kannada language in the primary schools of the region, which until then only taught Marathi. It also started publishing a monthly magazine, *Vagbhushana*, in 1896 to catalyse the renewal of Karnataka (ibid., 576).

1905 was a pivotal year. The British decision to partition the province of Bengal was vehemently opposed. These mass mobilisation against the division of a linguistic province left lasting imprints on newly emerging Kannada subnationalism (Devadevan and Naregal 2020). The foremost leader of the Karnataka unification movement, Alur Venkata Rao, wrote an influential article in 1907 as the editor of *Vagbhushana*, arguing that “the people of Karnataka could not progress without unification” (Rajasekhariah, Jayaramu, and Jayraj 1987, 557). He sought to give a concrete ideological framework for Karnataka unification by propounding the concept of *Kannadatva* (“Kannadaness”), “where language, culture and politics would complement each other” (Boratti 2022, 126). The linguistic subnationalisms and the popular mobilisations for linguistic provinces in different regions of colonial India heightened in 1928 when the Nehru Report, submitted by the All Parties Conference to the British colonial government in India, recommended the reorganisation of provinces on linguistic lines (ibid.). The acceptance of the principle of linguistic states as the basis of

federalism in India finally culminated in the territorial reorganisation of Karnataka and other states in 1956.

The representation of India and Karnataka in the literature of the period offers clues about the conception of federalism in Kannada subnationalism. Satyanath (2009, 210) notes that “the regional and national identities were constructed using a feminine identity”. India was represented as *Bharatmata* (“mother India”) and Karnataka as *Kannadamma* (“mother Karnataka”), and both were often given the form of a goddess (ibid.). Satyanath (ibid., 211) further explains that “a mother-daughter relationship was established between the regional and national mothers” to alleviate any tension that may emerge between the two. Such a relationship is clearly articulated in the current *naadageete* (state anthem) of Karnataka, written by K. V. Puttappa in 1924. It starts with these lines:

Jaya Bharata jananiya tanujate

Jaya he Karnataka maate

Victory to you Mother Karnataka,

The daughter of Mother India!

Cultural critic Rahmat Tarikere (2024) opines that framing the relationship between India and Karnataka as mother and daughter suggests that the mother, India, would want her daughter, Karnataka, to lead an unparalleled and independent life. He argues that this signifies the type of open and accommodative federalism that Karnataka desires. Therefore, the demands for a linguistic state and a federal political system became integral to the political ideology of Karnataka (Rajasekhariah, Jayaramu, and Jayraj 1987). Kannada subnationalism insisted that without establishing the state of Karnataka, “the people of Karnataka could not progress economically, culturally or politically” (ibid., 581).

4.2 The Social Profile of Karnataka

As in most parts of India, caste plays an important role in the social and political life of Karnataka. Lingayats and Vokkaligas are the two electorally and demographically dominant castes²⁰ in the state. M. N. Srinivas (1959, 1) defines a “dominant caste” as one that has numerical strength compared to other castes, wields “preponderant economic and political power,” and whose “position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low”. Both Lingayats and Vokkaligas are traditionally land-owning castes. They converted their dominance at the local level into their dominance in the politics of the state (Raghavan and Manor 2012). The Congress party traditionally relied on “the leverage which Vokkaligas and Lingayats derived from land control and key positions in the villages” to mobilise support during the elections (Manor 1977).

Before the unification of Karnataka in 1956, most of the rural Mysore was dominated by Vokkaligas. Consequently, they enjoyed a slight superiority over Lingayats in politics. However, when the heavily Lingayat districts of the Bombay Karnataka region was merged with Mysore in 1956, the numbers tilted in favour of Lingayats (Manor 1977). As a result, all the chief minister between 1956 and 1971 were Lingayats (see Appendix C). Manor (1977) has termed this period “Lingayat raj”. Lingayat community is electorally pivotal not only for its numerical strength – at 15.3% of the state’s population, they are the second largest caste group in Karnataka (see Table 4.1) – but also for its concentrated distribution. They are concentrated in about 70 constituencies, with a considerable influence in another 30. Therefore, in the first-past-the-post electoral system, the party winning a large share of their support is also likely to win a large number of seats. This is in contrast to the electoral arithmetic associated with the other caste groups/communities like SCs, Kuruba (an OBC

²⁰ Actually, they are not single castes, but rather they are clusters of castes (Raghavan and Manor 2012). “Caste group” might be a better label. But conventionally they are just referred to as castes.

caste), and Muslims, who are more dispersed across constituencies. The support from these groups would be more spread out geographically and may not be sufficient to out-compete other parties in a large number of constituencies. Therefore, the Congress party, which relies on the support from these communities, won fewer seats than BJP in 2004, 2008 and 2018 state elections even though it had a higher overall vote share in the state. In short, winning Lingayat support has been central to BJP's electoral success in Karnataka (Mehta 2024b).

Table 4. 1: Karnataka Population by Social Groups

<i>Social Group</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Upper Castes (Brahmins)	3.5
Lingayats	15.3
Vokkaligas	10.8
Non-dominant OBCs	32.5
Scheduled Castes (Dalits)	16.7
Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis)	6.7
Muslims	11.6
Other Minorities	2.9

(Source: Raghavan and Manor 2012)

The term Other Backward Classes (OBCs) span a large number of castes, many of which are relatively small in size. However, when considered collectively, they comprised nearly one-third of the population. On their own, the OBCs surpassed the combined numbers of Lingayats and Vokkaligas (Raghavan and Manor 2012). However, because this category is a collection of many castes, without necessarily a unifying agenda, it has been difficult to fortify their support. Moreover, due to their more disadvantaged status, they lack the kind of social and cultural capital that the dominant castes possess.

Karnataka also has a high degree of linguistic diversity. Nearly a third of the residents of Karnataka do not speak Kannada as their native language (see Table 4.2). This proportion is the highest among the southern states.

Table 4. 2: Karnataka Population by Native Language

<i>Language</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Kannada	64.75
Urdu	9.72
Telugu	8.34
Tamil	5.46
Marathi	3.95
Tulu	3.38

(Source: India Census 2011)

4.3 Politics in Karnataka

The Congress party was largely unrivalled in Karnataka between 1947 and 1983. With the support of both the dominant castes – Lingayats and Vokkaligas – solidly behind them, the Congress party had a firm hold on the seat of power in Bengaluru (Raghavan and Manor 2012). However, the political churning started in 1969 with the split of the Congress party at the national level. The stalwart Lingayat leaders left the Congress party and it was forced to reconfigure its social support base. This issue will be discussed at length in Chapter 5. Suffice to say, the Devaraj Urs government of 1972 attempted to use land reforms to break the dominance of Lingayats and Vokkaligas in the rural areas (Sanjal Shastri 2023). The overall effect of this was calamitous for the Congress. It suffered a decline in support from both communities, leading to the formation of a non-Congress government for the first time in Karnataka's history in 1983 (ibid.). This political realignment and the implosion of Janata

Party, which had just emerged as the rival to the Congress Party, provided BJP with an ideal opportunity to corner the Lingayat support. The analysis presented in Chapter 5 explains how the BJP achieved this goal.

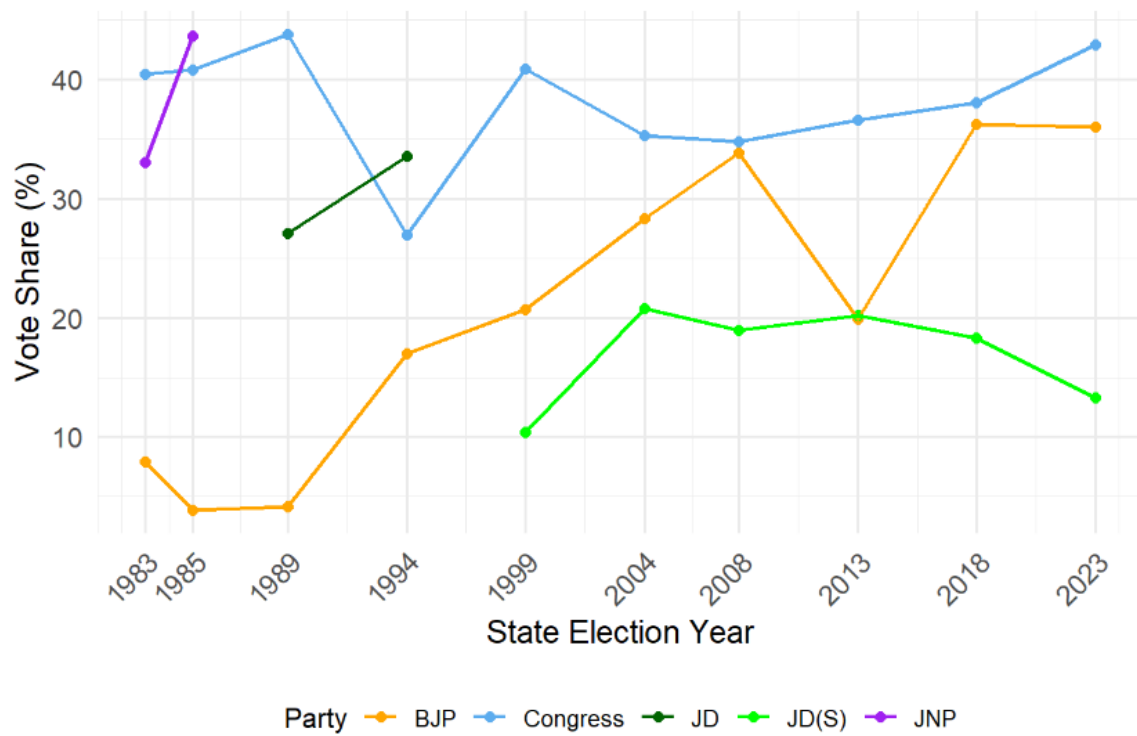


Figure 4. 1: The vote share of major parties in the Karnataka assembly elections since 1983

5. HOW THE BJP SUCCEEDED IN KARNATAKA

The challenge facing BJP in Karnataka was two-fold. First, BJP had to deal with Kannada subnationalism and convince that the party is not inimical to the state's interests despite its pro-Hindi and ambivalent federal antecedents. Second, the party had to expand its social support base beyond its core of upper caste supporters. By 2008 Karnataka legislative assembly elections, in which BJP achieved its highest tally of seats in the state assembly and formed the government on its own for the first time, BJP had decisively achieved both of its objectives. In a post-poll survey conducted soon after that election, nearly a third of Karnataka voters opined that the BJP was the best among the three major parties for safeguarding the interests of Kannadigas²¹. Considerably fewer voters believed that the Congress party or the regional JD(S) party were best suited for this task (Lokniti-CSDS 2008a). This signified the success of BJP in neutralising the challenge from Kannada subnationalism and achieving acceptance in Karnataka polity. Moreover, in that election, BJP

Table 5. 1: Preferred party for safeguarding the interests of Kannadigas in 2008.

Among the three major political parties in Karnataka, those who believe the best party for safeguarding the interests of Kannadigas is:	
<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
BJP	32.3
Congress	26.1
JD(S)	22.6

(Source: Lokniti-CSDS Karnataka Post-poll Survey 2008)

managed to secure a substantial support from numerically significant Lingayat and non-dominant OBC caste groups. 56% of Lingayat and 28% non-dominant OBC voters, in

²¹ "Kannadiga" is the demonym for the people of Karnataka or those who speak Kannada language.

addition to 43% of upper caste voters, supported BJP in 2008 state assembly elections, indicating BJP's success in expanding its social support base (Sandeep Shastri and Padmavathi 2009). This chapter explains how BJP succeeded in achieving both of its critical objectives.

5.1 Kannada Subnationalism and Culture

Kannada subnationalism, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, played a pivotal role in the unification of Karnataka and evolving a Kannada subnational identity. The character of this subnational identity was closely linked to Hindu cultural ideas and symbols. Moreover, due to the historical nature of its development under administrations dominated by other Indian languages, Marathi in Bombay Karnataka for instance, Kannada subnationalism had an adversarial outlook towards other languages and exhibited an inclination to target linguistic out-groups. As will be illustrated below, these aspects provided opportunities for BJP to import and legitimise its Hindu nationalist politics in Karnataka.

5.1.1 Affinity with Hindu cultural elements

Alur Venkata Rao, popularly known as “*Kannadada kulapurohita*” (literally, “the high priest of Kannada”) (Shivasundar 2022b), was a preeminent leader of the Karnataka unification movement. He was said to have been stirred by his 1905 visit to Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagara empire (1336 – 1646 CE), now a site of ruins (Devadevan and Naregal 2020). He recognised the need to recast history of the Kannada people and develop a rich modern literature (Nair 1996) to restore linguistic pride in Kannada (Rao 2010). As he outlined his objective in 1917, he endeavoured to develop “*Karnatakatva*”, “a unifying ideology for Kannada-speaking people in terms of territory and culture” (Gavaskar 2003). In

this endeavour, literature, encompassing both fiction and non-fiction, emerged as the principal site for promoting Kannada subnationalism (Niranjana 2013).

The medieval Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara was a central fixture in the Kannada literature produced in this period. Venkata Rao's historical work, *Karnataka Gathavaibhava* ("The Past Glory of Karnataka"), published in 1917, played an influential role in shaping the political imagination of Kannada people and activists (Swamy 2020). In this tract, he evoked "the glory of the Hindu past", epitomised by the Vijayanagara empire, to inspire pride in Kannada culture (Shivasundar 2022b). He constructed the history of the Kannada nation as the history of the Hindu nation (Nair 1996, 2813) and argued that its glory as a Hindu nation came to an end with the Islamic conquest (Amatullah 2022). Such a communal interpretation of Karnataka's history was a recurrent theme in many Kannada novels of the period (Shivasundar 2022b). Novelist Galaganatha's 1916 novel *Kannadigara Karma Kathe* ("The Fatal Story of Kannadigas"), which recounted the downfall of the Hindu Kannadiga Vijayanagara empire by the Islamic Bahamani sultanate, stands out as the typical example of the genre (ibid.).

Vijayanagara empire also formed the backdrop for literary works which aimed at articulating socio-political issues and beliefs. D.V Gundappa's play, *Shri Vidyaranya Vijaya* ("The Triumph of Vidyaranya", 1917), concerned with the construction of an "ideal" political system, was a prime example (Boratti 2019, 40). This play depicts the efforts of a spiritual guru (teacher), Vidyaranya, who guides the brothers Hukka and Bukka in establishing a Hindu kingdom by uniting Hindus of all sects to check the expansion of Muslim rulers from North India (ibid., 51). The play concludes by extolling the virtues of *varnashrama dharma*, the hierarchical social class system of the Hindu religion, for a peaceful and prosperous state (ibid., 52). During the period, Vidyaranya was portrayed as the paragon of Kannada nationalism and "the teacher who led to the establishment of the Kannada kingdom" in many

literary works (ibid., 50). Sakkari Balacharya, known by his pen name Shanthakavi, authored an influential *keertane*²² (a kind of narrative play), *Shri Vidyaranya Charitre* (“The History of Vidyaranya”), in 1918. Chronicling Vidyaranya’s role in establishing a new political state of Vijayanagara, Shanthakavi champions unifying Karnataka on the basis of linguistic identity, bringing together dispersed Kannada-speaking regions into a single entity (Satyanath 2009, 216). Significantly, a particular song in this narrative play, which came to be regarded as the *naadageethe* (akin to state anthem) at the time, represents Mother Karnataka²³ as a Hindu goddess, *Karnataka Devi*. The poet beseeches her thus:

rakshisu Karnataka Deviye samrakshisu
protect us, oh goddess of Karnataka, protect us (ibid., 215).

Shri Vidyaranya Charitre begins with a prayer to goddess Bhuvaneshvari, the deity of a historical temple in Hampi. An “inseparable relationship” between her and Karnataka Devi is established by the poet, Shanthakavi, in the discourse (ibid., 217). The tradition of representing Karnataka/Kannada Mother as a Hindu goddess found expression in many notable literary works of the time. For instance, another esteemed poet, B.M. Srikantaiah, hails the Kannada Mother in his poem “*Kannadada baavuta*” (“The Flag of Kannada”)²⁴ as follows:

Baal Kannada taai
El Kannada taai,
Aal Kannada taai.
Kannadigara odati oo Rajeshvari.

Long live, Oh Kannada Mother
Rise high, Oh Kannada Mother,
Rule long, Oh Kannada Mother,
The Master of Kannadigas, Oh Rajeshvari. (Satyanath 2009, 217)

²² Keertane is a form of religious discourse, sung and narrated in front of the audience with the help of musical accompaniments (Satyanath 2009, 219).

²³ The state, Karnataka, is often represented as a mother in literary as well as visual works.

²⁴ This poem was published in 1943 but was written much earlier (Satyanath 2009, 219).

History and Hindu religious mythology were popular themes for the literary works of the period because of their familiarity, mass appeal, and insulatory capability (Boratti 2019; Satyanath 2009). These themes were preferred by authors as the audience were deeply acquainted with the material, there was potential for creative interpretations and interpolations, and importantly, it passed thorough the filters of restrictive colonial apparatus (Satyanath 2009). In consequence, they left lasting imprint on Kannada subnationalism. Hindu cultural ideas and symbols became embedded in the Kannada subnational identity.

The literary and iconographic representations of Kannada Mother as goddess Bhuvaneshvari have become the common practice. The imagery of Bhuvaneshvari is constructed from the iconographic elements of medieval Hindu tradition linked to the Vijayanagara empire (Satyanath 2009, 217). As Satyanath (2009, 217) notes, carrying the idol of Bhuvaneshvari in a procession has become an important expression of Kannada subnationalism. It is also reinforced in schools. The Kannada textbook in class 5 has a poem titled “*Jai Bhuvaneshvari*” (“Victory to Bhuvaneshvari”) to introduce Karnataka’s history and culture to students (Government of Karnataka, n.d., 111–12). Further, the annual celebrations of *Kannada Rajyotsva* (“Karnataka State Day”) commonly involve making floral offerings to a picture/idol of goddess Bhuvaneshvari and hoisting the Kannada flag (e.g., see The Hindu 2010). Revealingly, the unofficial but widely used Kannada flag, which has become integral to Kannada subnational identity, has yellow and red colours, which have great significance in Hindu rituals. Yellow (turmeric) and red (vermilion) symbolise fertility or good fortune (*soubhagya*) in the Hindu tradition (Hegde 2017; Nandakumar 2012).

A survey of formative literary and iconographic representations of Karnataka reveals the location of Kannada subnationalism within “Hindu contextualism” – where Hindu symbols and rituals are treated as universal (Amatullah 2022, 790). Janaki Nair (1996) has argued that the Kannada subnationalism developed during the course of Karnataka unification

movement was largely “rooted in the language of worship, and failed to take into account the rich and varied Islamic, Sufi, and Jain cultural influences on Kannada culture” (Rao 2010, 11). The blending of Kannadaness with Hinduness created conditions for the legitimacy and success of BJP’s Hindu nationalist ideology and politics in Karnataka.

Moreover, BJP and their allies appropriated the practices associated with Kannada subnationalism to introduce exclusivist and blatantly communal practices to further popularise their politics. For instance, in the city of Kolar in Karnataka, on the lines of the procession of goddess Bhuvaneshvari on Kannada Rajyotsava (Karnataka State Day), the RSS introduced *Hindu Samajotsva* (literally, the festival of Hindu society) to reify Hindu communal identity. During these samajotsavas, various idols of local Hindu deities are assembled, and a procession is taken out. Common slogans during these processions include “Bharatiyaru Hindugalu” (“all Indians are Hindus”) and “navella vondu Hindu” (“we are all Hindus”) (Bhattacharjee 2020, 117). Hindu nationalists have also sought to capture important literary and cultural institutions in the state to influence its culture and further entrench their ideas and politics in Karnataka (Shivasundar 2022b). These efforts to further bind Hindu nationalism and Kannada subnationalism are still ongoing. The 2021 election of the candidate openly supported and campaigned for by the BJP and RSS as the president of the influential non-governmental body, Kannada Sahitya Parishat (lit. Kannada Literary Council), which is generally seen and expected to be apolitical, is a case in point (Raghunath 2021).

5.1.2 Adversarial outlook towards other linguistic groups

Before the territorial reorganisation of Indian states on the linguistic basis in 1956, most Kannada speakers were spread across multiple administrations. In most of these administrations, Kannada was not the official language. The States Reorganisation Commission, constituted by the Government of India, noted in its 1955 report that the

Kannada language speakers were the most fragmented during the British colonial rule (Nair 2011). Under the non-Kannadiga administrations, Kannada speakers were marginalised culturally, educationally and economically (Niranjana 2013; Devadevan and Naregal 2020). For instance, after the Bombay-Karnataka region was brought under the Bombay Presidency in the early 19th century, schools taught in Marathi even though the vast majority of the local population were Kannada speakers. Moreover, the administration, even at the local level, was dominated by Marathi speaking elites (Niranjana 2013). These developments led to the emergence of anti-Marathi sentiments in the public opinion. They found an early echo in Deputy Channabasappa's nascent campaign to introduce Kannada in schools in the mid-19th century (Devadevan and Naregal 2020). In the largest Kannada-speaking region, the princely state of Mysore, too, there was growing resentment against Tamil Brahmins who dominated the administration, creating a divide between Mysoreans and non-Mysoreans. This culminated in a strong anti-Tamil campaign under the slogan "Mysore for Mysoreans" in 1910s (Yogesha 2007). The grievances against the domination of non-Kannada speakers were a major reason for the emergence of Kannada subnationalism in the late 19th century (Devadevan and Naregal 2020). In fact, the influential monthly magazine, *Vagbhushana*, which played a formative role in the Karnataka unification movement, was started in Dharwad in 1895 to arraign against the Marathi "other" (ibid., 7).

Furthermore, the quest to build a "mono-lingually indexed territorial entity" by establishing dominance over other language groups within an intensely polyglot world created rivalry between linguistic subnationalisms (Boratti 2022). This often manifested in disputes between states over territorial boundaries or the sharing of river water resources. For example, Maharashtra, the successor state of the Bombay Presidency, continues to contest the inclusion of Belagavi district, which has a substantial Marathi speaking population, in Karnataka. Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, often disputes the management of Cauvery river

water resources by Karnataka. These long running tensions, which sometimes resulted in violent riots, hardened the adversarial attitudes towards the speakers of other languages.

Karnataka is linguistically the most diverse state in South India, with native speakers of Kannada constituting just about 65% of the state's population (India Census 2011). This is the lowest proportion of native speakers of the state's official language among the southern states. This gave rise to anxiety among Kannada activists who worried about Kannada becoming a minority language in Karnataka. This anxiety was amplified in Bengaluru, the state's capital, where only about 44.5% of the city residents speak Kannada (Ullas and Peter 2021). Consequently, a “fear-centred nationalism”, which was exclusivist and bordering on xenophobia, emerged, and was propagated by pro-Kannada politico-cultural organisations like Kannada Shakti Kendra (lit. “The Kannada Power Centre”) and Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (lit. “The Platform for Karnataka Protection”), which sometimes engaged in violence as seen during the 1991 anti-Tamil riots in Bengaluru (Rao 2010). These attitudes were evident in the findings of Lokniti-CSDS survey in 2008, which reported that nearly 50% of Kannadigas either partially or fully agreed that Tamil immigrants to Bengaluru had “spoiled the culture of Karnataka” (Lokniti-CSDS 2008b).

Table 5. 2: Kannadigas' perception of Tamil immigrants to Bengaluru in 2008.

Do you agree or disagree that the migration of Tamilians in Bengaluru has spoiled the culture of Karnataka?	
<i>Response</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Somewhat disagree	9.0
Fully disagree	12.8
Somewhat agree	14.6
Fully agree	36.8
No opinion	26.7

(Source: Lokniti-CSDS Karnataka Pre-poll Survey 2008)

The adversarial outlook of Kannada subnationalism provided BJP an ideal setting for its politics of communal polarisation. A vast majority of Muslims in Karnataka, who constitute about 11.2% of the state's population (Patil and Shastri 1994), speak Urdu as their native tongue. This was used to construct the Muslim other. The invocation of Kannada subnationalism to target religious minorities was evident during the 1994 anti-Urdu riots in Bengaluru. In October 1994, the Congress government in Karnataka introduced a 10-minute news bulletin in Urdu on the state-owned television channel, Doordarshan (Bhattacharjee 2020, 117). Soon, protest marches and demonstrations were organised in Bengaluru by pro-Kannada organisations including Kannada Shakti Kendra and Channakeshavapura Kannada Sangha (lit. Channakeshavapura Kannada Union) to oppose this move (ibid.). The members of the BJP and RSS affiliated organisation, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) (lit. All-India Students' Council), too joined the protest, and it quickly acquired communal overtones (Rao 2010, 14). The ABVP deliberately carried out the protest march through Muslim dominated areas of the city and raised provocative slogans before a Mosque where many Muslims had gathered for Friday prayers (Engineer 1994, 2858). Their actions exacerbated communal tensions and the resultant violence consumed at least 25 lives, apart from causing large-scale damage to properties (Rao 2010, 14). This incident evidences how BJP and its allies readily established the link between language, religion, and nationalism to consolidate their politics in Karnataka (Nair 1994).

In sum, due to its development under the domination of non-Kannada speakers, Kannada subnationalism developed an adversarial outlook towards linguistic outgroups. This outlook hardened during the struggle to establish dominance over the region to create a mono-lingually indexed province. The anxiety about losing linguistic majority further consolidated the antagonistic attitudes and led to the emergence of a plethora chauvinist pro-

Kannada organisations. The BJP and other Hindu nationalist organisations joined hands with these pro-Kannada groups, and targeted Muslims as the linguistic other, further entrenching the communal divide in the society and politics of Karnataka (Bhattacharjee 2020). Thus, Kannada subnationalism has enabled BJP to tap into its affinity with Hindu cultural elements and adversarial outlook towards linguistic outgroups to localise its exclusivist Hindu nationalist politics in Karnataka. A close alignment with Kannada subnationalism helped BJP to legitimise its politics and convince that it is not inimical to state's culture or interests.

5.2 Social Support Base

In addition to exploiting Kannada subnationalism to propagate Hindu nationalist ideology and politics, BJP needed to expand its social support base beyond a strong core of upper caste voters to achieve electoral success in Karnataka. As Figure 5.1 demonstrates, BJP has emerged as the preferred party of a majority of Lingayats. Moreover, it has made significant gains among the non-dominant OBC castes such as Billavas, which has made the coastal districts of Karnataka BJP strongholds. This section explains how the BJP, traditionally seen as the party of the upper castes, managed to acquire the Lingayat support and make significant gains among the non-dominant OBC castes in the coastal districts of Karnataka.

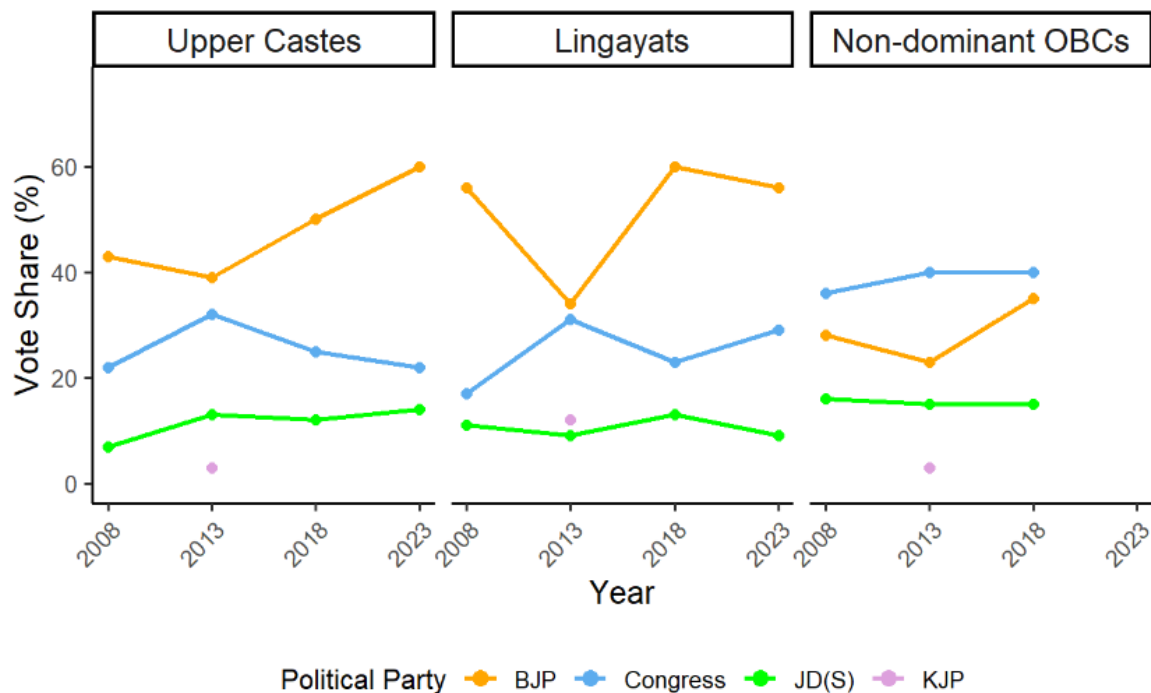


Figure 5. 1: The vote share of parties in select social groups in state assembly elections (2008-23)
(Data Source: Lokniti-CSDS State Election Studies)

5.2.1 Support from Lingayats

The BJP emerged as the single largest party for the first time in its electoral history in Karnataka during the 2004 state assembly election. Since then, it has achieved this feat two more times, in 2008 and 2018 elections respectively, forming the government on each occasion either on its own or in a coalition²⁵. The consolidation of its support among Lingayats is a major reason for its emergence as a serious electoral force in Karnataka. Lingayats constitute about 16% of the state's population and are the second largest caste group, just behind the SCs (Patil and Shastri 1994, 246). As will be discussed below, the political realignment in Karnataka polity since the 1970s and the BJP's success at forging close ties with Lingayat *mathas* (a kind of religious institution) played a crucial role in the

²⁵ Not necessarily immediately after the election. It came to power in 2006 as a junior partner of JD(S).

BJP cementing its support among this demographically and electorally significant social group.

5.2.1.1 Political Realignment

From 1956 to 1972, Lingayats, a land-owning caste group, dominated the politics of Karnataka. During this period, all the chief ministers of the state (see Appendix C) and, on average, about a third of all the legislators in the Karnataka legislative assembly were Lingayats, even though they constituted about 15.5% of the population at the time (Mehta 2024b). This prompted James Manor (1977) to term this period as “Lingayat Raj”. The support from both the dominant castes in the state, Lingayats and Vokkaligas, ensured the hegemonic position of the Congress party in Karnataka politics. However, in 1969, there was a split in the Congress party nationally due to disagreements between the organisational wing and the governmental wing over economic policies and the selection of the presidential candidate (Hardgrave 1970). The resultant Congress (Organisation) party was led by the conservative old guard, including the former chief minister of Karnataka, S. Nijalingappa, who was the national president of the Congress at the time of the split. The other faction, the Congress (Requisitionists), were headed by Indira Gandhi, the populist prime minister of India, who wanted to pursue left-wing economic policies such as the nationalisation of major commercial banks, effective implementation of land reforms, and ceilings on urban income and property (ibid., 257). The Karnataka Congress government, headed by Veerendra Patil, a Lingayat, sided with Nijalingappa, a Lingayat stalwart leader who had been Karnataka chief minister twice. As the major Lingayat leaders aligned with the Congress (O) party, the Congress (R) party was compelled to build a new social coalition of support to acquire the reins of power in Karnataka.

The popular support for Indira Gandhi's policies to fight poverty and inequality ensured a resounding victory for her Congress party²⁶ in the 1972 Karnataka assembly election. She chose D. Devaraj Urs, who belonged to a small backward caste, as the new chief minister of Karnataka, intending to weaken the power of the dominant Lingayat and Vokkaliga castes (Manor 1977). Urs sought to use the levers of power, including law, bureaucracy, and finances, to benefit the relatively small backward castes and communities and thus, mobilise their support (Rodrigues 2014). He constituted a Backward Classes Commission in 1972 to lay down the criteria to determine backwardness of communities and to recommend affirmative action policies. Based on the Commission's recommendation, Urs government extended reservation²⁷ benefits to the backward classes, including a section of Muslims and Vokkaligas, in educational institutions and public employment. By including Vokkaligas, while excluding Lingayats, in the reservation regime, he ensured that the two dominant caste groups would not combine against the Congress (Raghavan and Manor 2012). Urs also implemented land reform policies, such as abolishing tenancy and providing "land to the tiller" (ibid.). These policies significantly benefitted disadvantaged groups and disrupted the agrarian relations in the rural areas, diminishing the power of landed castes such as Lingayats (Rodrigues 2014). Moreover, under Urs, the representation of individuals from the disadvantaged SC, ST, and OBC caste groups increased both in the legislature and the state cabinet, giving them influence over policy making (ibid., 64). These measures allowed the Congress party to assemble a new "rainbow coalition" of support comprising the non-dominant OBC, SC, ST and Muslim groups (Raghavan and Manor 2012). The importance of this coalition is evident in the Congress's choice of chief ministers in the subsequent years.

²⁶ As the Congress (O), which had only limited electoral success, merged with other parties to form the Janata Party in 1977, Indira Gandhi's Congress (R) will be referred to as just the Congress party.

²⁷ "Reservation" is a policy of positive discrimination in India wherein a certain quota of seats in higher education institutions or government jobs is reserved for candidates from specific social categories. These social categories are identified based on the social and educational backwardness of social groups (mainly caste groups).

After Urs, four out of the seven Congress chief ministers have been from traditionally non-dominant OBC castes. In comparison, the chief ministers from the other parties in the same period have all been from traditionally dominant castes (Lingayats, Vokkaligas and Brahmins) (see Appendix C).

As the Congress party reworked its caste matrix, the support of dominant communities shifted to its newly emergent rival, the Janata Party. In fact, in the 1985 Karnataka assembly election which it won, 65% of the Janata Party candidates belonged to dominant communities (Rodrigues 2014, 65). To counter the consolidation of dominant caste support for the Janata Party, the Congress party nominated the veteran Lingayat leader, Veerendra Patil as the new chief minister after its electoral victory in 1989. However, his unceremonious removal from the post by the Congress central leadership within an year further alienated Lingayats from the Congress party (Mehta 2024b). The Janata Party could not cement the Lingayat support base as the party suffered from intense factionalism, which led to multiple splits. As H. D. Deve Gowda, a Vokkaliga, emerged as the pre-eminent leader of the Janata Dal²⁸, the successor of Janata Party, the party came to be seen as representing Vokkaliga interests. This left the door open for the BJP to acquire the Lingayat support.

Since its founding in 1980, the BJP promoted Lingayat leaders like B. B. Shivappa and B. S. Yediyurappa in Karnataka (see Appendix D). When Patil was sacked from the chief minister's post by the Congress in 1990, the BJP, under the leadership of Yediyurappa, sought to present it as "the humiliation of the Lingayat community" (Mehta 2024b). The BJP attempted to create a narrative of "injured Lingayat pride" to present itself as the advocate of their interests and to burnish Yediyurappa's credentials as a Lingayat leader (ibid.). The promotion of Lingayat leaders by BJP and the alienation of Lingayat voters from other parties in the state, started the gradual process of the movement of Lingayat voters towards BJP

²⁸ It later became Janata Dal (Secular) or JD(S).

(ibid.). This movement was expedited by the strategic alliance between BJP and the splinter groups of Janata Dal with considerable Lingayat support base, such as, Lok Shakti Party of Ramakrishna Hegde and Janata Dal (United) of J.H. Patel (Desai 2019). The Lingayat support, thus, coalesced around BJP and it became the vehicle for the Lingayat aspirations for power. The fact that three out of four BJP chief ministers and five out of eleven BJP state presidents in Karnataka were Lingayats reinforces this point. It is also pertinent to note here that when Yediyurappa quit BJP and formed a new party - Karnataka Janata Paksha (KJP) – the Lingayat support for the BJP declined significantly in the 2013 Karnataka assembly election, contributing to BJP’s defeat in the election. As he returned to BJP, the Lingayat support for BJP picked up again and BJP emerged as the single largest party in 2018 election (see Figure 5.1).

5.2.1.2 Forging ties with Lingayat mathas

In addition to providing leadership positions to Lingayat leaders, BJP assiduously cultivated the Lingayat support by forging close ties with *mathas*²⁹. A matha is a religious institution in South India which wields enormous influence in local society (Ikegame 2012a). Lingayat mathas have been in existence in Karnataka at least since the 15th century CE (Nair 2021). They often provide a wide array of welfare services to the rural population (Ikegame 2012a). Ikegame (2012b, 691) notes that these services in the recent years include “running free schools, orphanages, profitable engineering and medical colleges; providing free medical care for the poor and free midday meals to government schools; and [even] running informal courts.” Therefore, Kannada literary historian M. M. Kalburgi has characterised the Lingayat mathas as “*anadhikrita sarkara*” (“an unauthorised government”) in the hinterland of Karnataka (Nair 2021).

²⁹ It also spelled *maṭha*, *maṭh*, or *mutt*.

To firmly consolidate Lingayat support, the BJP offered patronage to numerous Lingayat mathas. Even though the Hindu nationalist ideology of Hindu supremacy is antithetical to the theology of Lingayatism, these mathas accepted the state patronage and budgetary grants as they benefitted their various services (Desai 2019, 96). Moreover, the state patronage was advantageous to the business interests of the Lingayat elites associated with these mathas (Shivasundar 2022a). Furthermore, Lingayat elites and religious activists were drawn to the orbit of Hindu nationalism by involving them in the activities of Hindu nationalist organisations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) (lit. World Hindu Council). (ibid.). Many Lingayat seers participated in the Virat Hindu Sangams (akin to a big Hindu conference) organised by VHP (Shivasundar 2023). In addition, the state instruments were used to promote the teachings of prominent Lingayat seers (ibid.). In short, by offering patronage, a medium for propagating Lingayat teachings, and involving Lingayat elites in the activities of Hindu nationalist organisations, BJP fortified their Lingayat support base.

5.2.2 Support from non-dominant OBC castes in coastal Karnataka

The effect of the ideological activities of RSS is nowhere more apparent than in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi in Karnataka, where RSS has established a strong presence (Pinto 2019). Bhattacharjee (2020) has argued that RSS and its affiliate organisations, collectively called the “Sangh Parivar” (“the family of RSS”), operate as an ecosystem, penetrating every aspect of society. Concerted efforts of Sangh Parivar, which include holding “Hindu Samajotsavas” (“celebrating Hindu society”) in collaboration with Brahmin Mathas, have improved the fortunes of BJP in the region. Local cultural practices of backward caste communities in these districts, such as Billavas³⁰, have been given Hindu

³⁰ Billavas were traditionally toddy tappers and landless agricultural workers. They are electorally significant as they constitute about 30% of the population of Dakshina Kannada (Sanjal Shastri 2023).

nationalist colour to cultivate a strident Hindu identity, set against that of religious minorities, who are present in higher proportion in these districts (Assadi 2002). Assadi (2002) has argued that the “import of [Hindu nationalist] ideology transplanted through the reproduction of ritual symbolism” has helped in broadening the social base of Hindu nationalism. Moreover, the active involvement of Billava youths in religio-cultural events such as “Sarvajanika Ganesh Utsav” (lit. “the public festival of Lord Ganesh”) organised by the Sangh Parivar, gave them a sense of cultural mobility, thus far denied by the local caste hierarchy (Kuthar 2020a). Kuthar (2020b) has argued that the programmes of the Sangh Parivar leaned significantly on “evoking a homogenising religious pride while appropriating local cultural symbols”. These efforts served two purposes. First, a unified political community of Hindus was created in place of a society riven by caste hierarchies. Second, the embedded Hindu identity could be readily invoked to mobilise in support of Hindu nationalist causes. The community thus formed became a solid core of support for Hindu nationalist politics in the region. Further, the Hindu nationalist ideas were reinforced through symbols and discourses relating to issues such as “liberating” Hindu places of worship from the Muslim “other”, prohibition of cow slaughter, and protection of Hindu culture from the onslaught of the others by severely restricting religious conversions and inter-faith marriages (Assadi 2002).

In sum, a social coalition in favour of BJP and its Hindu nationalist politics has been built in these districts by constructing a Hindu nationalist identity embedded in the common cultural practices of the local castes, Billavas in particular. This Hindu nationalist identity has proved to be enduring as the BJP has never lost a parliamentary election from Dakshin Kannada since 1991. Consequently, there is a greater degree of communal polarisation in these districts, which sometimes result in deadly communal violence.

6. CONCLUSION

The electoral success of BJP in Karnataka was puzzling as the pro-Hindi and anti-federal ideological lineage and the traditional upper caste support base posed significant challenges in Karnataka. The Kannada subnationalism was premised in Kannada pride and championed the federal political system. Moreover, both electorally and demographically, the upper castes were considerably less significant in Karnataka compared to BJP's strongholds in the Hindi belt. Yet, BJP has been able to surmount the challenges presented by the Kannada subnational identity and caste identities in Karnataka. This thesis developed the following explanation for the BJP's success.

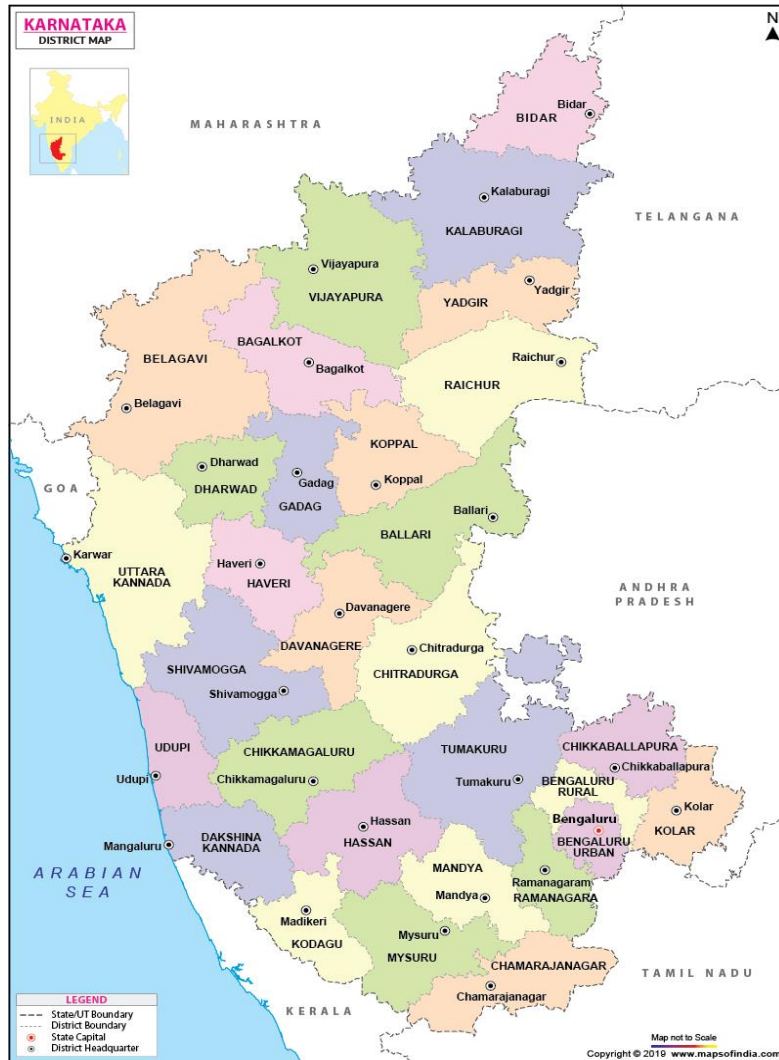
Kannada subnationalism is closely aligned with the Hindu cultural elements. BJP tapped into the Hindu cultural aspects of Kannada subnationalism to legitimise and further propagate Hindu nationalist politics in Karnataka. Furthermore, it exploited the adversarial attitude of Kannada subnationalism towards linguistic outgroups to construct the Muslim other. "Kannada protection" provided the cover to target Urdu speaking Muslims. Thus, Kannada subnationalism became a channel to propagate Hindu nationalism.

BJP's electoral success in Karnataka is built on the strong support from Lingayats, a dominant caste group, and non-dominant backward castes like Billavas who are concentrated in the coastal districts. The great flux in Karnataka politics in 1970s and 1980s following the splits in the Congress party and the reorientation of the Congress government's socio-economic policies under Devaraj Urs towards backward castes and the poor, saw Lingayats moving away from the Congress. The BJP offered leadership positions to Lingayats and cultivated close ties with the influential Lingayat mathas to gradually become their most preferred party. In the coastal districts, BJP and other Hindu nationalist organisations assiduously cultivated the support from the backward castes, such as Billavas, by constructing a Hindu nationalist identity embedded in their common cultural practices.

The major contribution of this thesis is in presenting a framework for the analysis of BJP's electoral success, or lack thereof, in the states beyond the Hindi belt. These analyses must necessarily confront the following two questions. First, did/how did the BJP make Hindu nationalism compatible with the state's subnationalism? Second, did/how did the BJP negotiate the caste identities and expand its social support base. This approach to the comparative study of BJP in India has the potential to generate interesting insights and contribute to develop a more general theory of BJP's politics in India.

APPENDIX

A. Political Map of Karnataka



(Source: Maps of India website
<https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/karnataka/karnataka.htm>)

B. Map of the Region before Karnataka Unification (1947 – 56)



(Source: Wikimedia

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karnataka_1956_Reorg.svg)

C. List of All the Chief Ministers of Karnataka (1956 – 2024)

S.No.	Name	Tenure	Caste	Party
Mysore State: Before Territorial Reorganisation (1947 – 56)				
1.	K. Chengalaraya Reddy	1947 – 52	Vokkaliga	Congress
2.	K. Hanumanthaiah	1952 – 56	Vokkaliga	Congress
3.	Kadidal Manjappa	1956 – 56	Vokkaliga	Congress
Karnataka State ³¹ : After Territorial Reorganisation (1956 –)				
4.	S. Nijalingappa	1956 – 58; 1962 – 68	Lingayat	Congress
5.	B. D. Jatti	1958 – 62	Lingayat	Congress
6.	S. R. Kanthi	1962 – 62	Lingayat	Congress
7.	Veerendra Patil	1968 – 71; 1989 – 90	Lingayat	Congress / Congress (O); Congress
8.	D. Devaraj Urs	1972 – 77; 1978 – 80	Urs (OBC)	Congress (R) / Congress
9.	R. Gundu Rao	1980 – 83	Brahmin (Upper Caste)	Congress
10.	Ramakrishna Hegde	1983 – 85; 1985 – 88	Brahmin (Upper Caste)	Janata Party
11.	S. R. Bommai	1988 – 89	Lingayat	Janata Party
12.	S. Bangarappa	1990 – 92	Ediga (OBC)	Congress
13.	M. Veerappa Moily	1992 – 94	OBC	Congress
14.	H. D. Deve Gowda	1994 – 96	Vokkaliga	Janata Dal
15.	J. H. Patel	1996 – 99	Lingayat	Janata Dal
16.	S. M. Krishna	1999 – 2004	Vokkaliga	Congress
17.	Dharam Singh	2004 – 06	Rajput (OBC)	Congress
18.	H. D. Kumaraswamy	2006 – 07; 2018 – 19	Vokkaliga	Janata Dal (Secular)
19.	B. S. Yediyurappa	2007 – 07;	Lingayat	BJP

³¹ After the territorial reorganisation, the state was still called “Mysore”. Its name was changed to “Karnataka” in 1973.

		2008 – 11; 2018 – 18; 2019 – 21		
20.	D. V. Sadananda Gowda	2011 – 12	Vokkaliga	BJP
21.	Jagadish Shettar	2012 – 13	Lingayat	BJP
22.	Siddaramaiah	2013 – 18; 2023 –	Kuruba (OBC)	Congress
23.	Basavaraj Bommai	2021 – 23	Lingayat	BJP

(Source: Mehta 2024)

D. List of All the State Presidents of BJP in Karnataka (1980 – 2024)

S.No.	Name	Tenure	Caste
1.	A. K. Subbaiah	1980 – 83	Kodava
2.	B. B. Shivappa	1983 – 88	Lingayat
3.	B. S. Yediyurappa	1988 – 91; 1998 – 99; 2016 – 19	Lingayat
4.	K. S. Eshwarappa	1993 – 98; 2010 – 12	Kuruba (OBC)
5.	Basavaraj Patil Sedam	2000 – 03	Lingayat
6.	Ananth Kumar	2003 – 04	Brahmin (Upper Caste)
7.	Jagadish Shettar	2004 – 06	Lingayat
8.	D. V. Sadananda Gowda	2006 – 10	Vokkaliga
9.	Pralhad Joshi	2013 – 16	Brahmin (Upper Caste)
10.	Nalin Kumar Kateel	2019 – 23	Bunt (OBC)
11.	B. Y. Vijayendra	2023 –	Lingayat

(Source: Karnataka BJP Website
<https://karnataka.bjp.org/home>)

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