

# Last Lap of the Karnataka Elections

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Congress Chief Minister Siddaramaiah faces no severe criticism for his tenure, but there are constituents of Karnataka that are unhappy with the incumbent government. Sections of the Lingayats firmly back the Bharatiya Janata Party in parts of central and northern Karnataka, which challenges the Congress's prospects of a second term. The Janata Dal (Secular) is also a force to reckon with in south Karnataka. However, overall, the contest will probably be a close one, primarily between the Congress and the BJP.

Seldom has a ruling party at the centre invested its political resources and energies so intensively in a state election, as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has done in the ongoing Karnataka polls.

The elections in Tripura and Uttar Pradesh, both of which the BJP won, involved other issues that drew focus away from the central government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Tripura was, first and foremost, framed as a battle of “ideologies.” The age-old hatred the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Jana Sangh and later the BJP have harboured against the Marxists and Maoists was built up to dislodge the Manik Sarkar government by demonising the former chief minister as “incompetent,” “insensitive,” and even “corrupt.” The unseating of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—CPI(M) government in Agartala was celebrated as a victory nonpareil by the BJP, with Modi leading its triumphant march. In Uttar Pradesh, former Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav was sufficiently discredited before the BJP began campaigning. More than painting Yadav as a hate figure, the BJP continued tapping into the subliminal antagonisms that had accumulated against Muslims amongst large sections of Hindus. The rancour was validated by the charge that Yadav had pursued and practised “vigorous minority appeasement.” The Modi “sarkar” and its so-called development agenda were secondary to the religious polarisation the BJP had achieved under the garb of pointing out “appeasement.”

## Opening Doors to the South

Karnataka, however, is a different kettle of fish. In serial interviews to dailies and television channels, BJP President Amit Shah expatiated on why the elections

meant so much to his party and the Modi government. “Every election is important in national politics. But this one is particularly important for us because success here will open the doors in the south,” he said in one such interview (Jha 2018). Shah went into reasons that transcended the compulsion of making a mark in South India in another interview, where he explained,

There is a sense of excitement among people to make the BJP form the next government in Karnataka. The first reason is the efficient way Narendra Modi has functioned at the Centre. Information on the performance of the BJP-ruled states has been flowing into Karnataka ... Everyone knows that development is possible only if you are part of Modi’s “vikas yatra” [development peregrination]. This is how the BJP has been winning elections in every state. (Dhal Samanta 2018)

Notice the emphasis on “development” and the suggestion that Karnataka will soar to new heights if it elects the BJP to power, as it will then be assured of the centre’s unqualified cooperation. Underlying Shah’s averments were two apprehensions. First, the Congress government in Karnataka, helmed by Siddaramaiah, was no pushover. Despite a hostile central government, Siddaramaiah succeeded in making a mark in certain sectors. The most vital were welfare programmes for the poor, a hallmark of politics in the South, apart from addressing caste equations and religious polarisation that often supersede social concerns and measures in the North. Second, if the Congress retains government, it would belie the BJP’s loud claim that the “Grand Old Party” was fossilised and incapable of even governing a state, let alone the country.

The RSS’s ideology and the BJP’s Hindutva brand are at work. But, in Siddaramaiah, the BJP reckoned it was up against a far more formidable opponent than Sarkar or Yadav (Rodrigues 2018a). Amongst the voters, Siddaramaiah hardly provoked censure or criticism, and if an uncharitable remark was made, it was half in mirth and referred to his reported tendency to doze off in meetings. The worst accusation against

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him was that he pandered to the interests of the backward castes, particularly the Kuruba caste of shepherds to which he belongs, and the Muslims because among the slew of the “Bhagya” schemes he had executed, the “Shaadi Bhagya [marriage gift/service]” allocated ₹50,000 only for Muslim girls who were about to be married.

### Lingayat Question

The Lingayat community that predominates in central and northern Karnataka, has largely turned against Siddaramaiah because of his government’s decision to classify the Lingayat–Veerashaiva combine as a separate religious minority. The BJP promptly propagated the argument that the decision was a gambit to undermine its hold over the Lingayat–Veerashaiva, and further that it was a ploy to destabilise the “Sanatana Dharma” and by implication the Hindu religion itself. In Haveri (north Karnataka), the BJP encouraged bands of young Lingayats to tell members of the community who were marked out as “pro-Congress” as well as Lingayat leaders of the Congress,

to vote for the BJP and affirm their “oneness” as a community that was on the threshold of regaining its political supremacy after 10 years. At the Sree Sidaganga Lingayat Mutt in Tumukur (central Karnataka), which was described as “non-sectarian” and, “non-political” by a senior representative, the assessment was that Siddaramaiah’s move was “politically motivated,” and therefore, it was incumbent on the community to vote for the BJP as “one,” particularly because B S Yeddyurappa was the party’s chief ministerial nominee. After Veerendra Patil, the late Congress chief minister, Yeddyurappa has become an icon for the Lingayats. The Lingayats abandoned the Congress after Rajiv Gandhi publicly snubbed Patil.

Rodrigues (2018b) contextualises the development in a historical perspective.

While the demand to declare Lingayats/Veerashaivas/Veerashaiva–Lingayats as a separate religion came to be voiced from the 1940s, the demand did not enjoy support as long as the community had political preponderance. Besides, a large section of Lingayats hailing from lower castes were brought under reservation benefits although the

Veerashaiva Mahasabha had always sought reservation for the community as a whole, and in the 1970s and 1980s organised public protests for the same.

A set of new developments in recent years, however, have placed the community at a crossroad. While its shrinking political space has made it to look towards the BJP as an alternative, the community has also come under the ideological sway of the sangh parivar. This has bred much resentment within the mutts, which were self-consciously Lingayat.

The apolitical Lingayats I spoke to perceived a few benefits from Siddaramaiah’s decision: “protection” under Articles 29 and 30 that endows them the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice and claim grants-in-aid without discrimination, exemption from the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, exemption from reserving seats for the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, and giving preference to donors over others. However, the spin-offs were not enough to ensure a decisive split in the Lingayat votes between the Congress

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and the BJP, the major claimant, except in seats such as Davanagere North where the Congress has fielded a strong and popular candidate.

### Siddaramaiah's Touch

Siddaramaiah's Lingayat gambit may not fetch him the dividends he expects. His welfare measures, conceived and implemented as a holistic package for the disempowered, the marginalised, and the aspiring classes, have posed a formidable challenge to the BJP that is busy weaving theories to establish part ownership over some of the more impactful schemes.

Take the "Anna [grains] Bhagya" scheme that is perhaps one of the most ambitious and expansive of India's food security programmes for those living below the poverty line (BPL). It covers 1.08 crore families and 3.8 crore persons. Each BPL family gets 7 kg of rice per month free of cost, 1 kg each of wheat and lentils, cooking oil at a subsidised price of ₹24 per litre, and iodised salt at ₹2 per packet. The BJP's claim was that the centre had procured rice at ₹32.64 per kg and supplied it to Karnataka at ₹2 per kg, thereby picking up ₹29.64 per kg of the tab for the subsidy. Modi's cheerleaders demanded that the scheme should be renamed as the "Modi Bhagya" scheme. To this, Siddaramaiah asked: if it was a BJP-sponsored one, why was it not similarly implemented in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Haryana where the BJP was in power?

### Caste Dynamics

Caste was another dimension in the strategies evolved by the three players, including the Janata Dal (Secular)—JD(S) that is pitted against the Congress in mostly straight fights in 61 seats in the Mysuru region. The BJP has the assured support of the Lingayats, and that of the Nayaka tribes, the Brahmins, and a section of the backward castes. Like former Chief Minister Devaraj Urs, Siddaramaiah regrouped sections of the backward castes, Dalits, and minorities. However, the sense among some of the backward-caste groupings was that he had "favoured" the Kurubas at the expense of other castes. The Vokkaligas, an intermediate caste,

whose votes were split between the Congress and the JD(S) in 2013, are rooting in larger numbers for the JD(S) in the hope that H D Kumaraswamy, the scion of H D Deve Gowda, will be the kingmaker after 15 May.

To sum up, the BJP's original game plan of polarising Hindus and minorities has not taken off. This is true even in parts of coastal Karnataka where it had whipped up a concerted propaganda over the "killing" of several of its workers, which proved to be largely fictitious. Where the Lingayat vote is dominant, the BJP is in a commanding position. The Congress has counted on Siddaramaiah's pro-poor image and projects and an Urs-like caste regrouping to win a second term. The JD(S) has suffered considerably from the insinuations that it is ready to do business with the BJP for a second time in order to have a shot at power because the Muslims have turned away from the party. Indeed, a common sight in the JD(S) strongholds are groups of party workers reaching out individually to Muslim homes in minority-dominated areas to counter the perception, but, perhaps, it is too late.

Based on the political presence and strengths of key parties in the various regions of Karnataka, one can expect a close fight between the BJP and Congress. There is no wave in the state for a particular party. The BJP has recovered much of the ground it yielded to the Congress in its original strongholds in central and northern Karnataka (after Yeddyurappa rebelled and fought independently) and has a robust organisation, and has acquired important caste leaders. The Congress is counting on marginalising the JD(S) in the Mysuru region that has 61 of the 224 assembly seats and getting the near-total backing of the Kurubas (who exist in practically every constituency in big and small numbers), some other backward castes, Dalits, and minorities.

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