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Regions within Regions — Negotiating Political Spaces: A Case Study of Karnataka

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Karnataka politics has witnessed significant developments since the 1980s. This period has seen as many as nine Lok Sabha elections and seven Assembly elections, each election ushering in a new trend and triggering off a series of political developments of far-reaching political significance. In the 1980 Lok Sabha poll, the voters unequivocally endorsed the claims of the Congress. Within a few years, in early 1983, in the Assembly poll, the results threw up a House with no clear party securing a majority. The Janata Party was able to form a minority government. The next year (1984), the Lok Sabha polls saw the Congress once again doing well in the state. Within a few months (1985), the same voters now gave a mandate to the Janata Party to form a government in the state by giving it a clear majority. Later, in 1989, when simultaneous polls were held, the Congress secured a landslide victory in the Assembly polls and did well in the Lok Sabha poll from the state. If in the 1991 polls the voters once again sent a large Congress team to the Lok Sabha, it decided to endorse the claims of the Janata Dal in the 1994 Assembly Elections. The 1996 Lok Sabha elections witnessed the twilight of Congress hegemony with the Janata Dal securing a majority of the seats and within two years, in 1998, the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance was favoured by the Karnataka voters. The very next year, 1999, the Congress won a majority of the seats in both the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in the state. In 2004, the state once again witnessed simultaneous polls and the voters made a clear distinction by sending a majority of BJP MPs to Delhi but elected an Assembly where no single party enjoyed a majority. In the Assembly elections held in 2008, the BJP fell short of a majority by just three seats and managed to form the government with the

support of independents. In the Lok Sabha election held in 2009, the BJP maintained its winning streak and further consolidated on its 2004 Lok Sabha performance.

It is interesting to note that, since 1991, in every Lok Sabha election the Karnataka voters have supported a different political party/alliance, save in 2009. The same is true of the Assembly elections held in the state since the 1980s. In the five major Assembly elections held in the last two decades (1983, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009) the electorate in the state has rejected the ruling party and paved the way for another party to come to power.¹ The message the voters wished to convey, especially to the ruling party (both the one voted out and the one voted in), is categorical: non-performance and intra-party squabbles will not find favour² (see Shastri 1999b). A more nuanced analysis of the results would show that the 'regions' within Karnataka played a major role in defining the nature of the results.

¹ It is important to dwell at some length on the classification of castes in Old Mysore/Karnataka. The upper-caste category is mainly composed of the Brahmins. The concept of 'backward castes' has a long history of use in India. It is normally used to refer to those caste groups which have historically been denied opportunities to equip themselves and thus have failed to benefit from education or acquiring wealth and status in society. In the princely state of Mysore, as early as in 1921, the term 'backward' was defined as 'all communities other than Brahmins, who are now adequately represented in the public service' (as quoted in Galantar 1984: 1812). With the organisation of the Backward Castes in Old Mysore, the major landowning communities among the backwards — the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas — gradually organised themselves and benefited significantly from the non-Brahmin movement in the state. Gradually, the two castes, both in terms of their political influence and economic power, came to acquire the status of dominant castes. With the government offering preferential treatment to the backwards, the backward castes became a zone of much controversy. Several commissions have been recommended that either one or both the dominant castes be excluded from the category of backwards. Such recommendations have immediately evoked an adverse reaction from the effected dominant caste. While preparing the list of Backward Castes, the government has always succumbed to the pressures from the dominant castes and continues to allow them to be a part of the Backward Caste basket. Thus, in this article, the term 'OBC' refers to the non-dominant backward castes; it does not include the SCs and STs as they are listed separately.

² The 1985 elections are not being considered as they were held within two years of the 1983 Assembly elections. In the 2004 elections it would be difficult to

Nature of Political Competition in the State

An analysis of the Lok Sabha election results in Karnataka prior to the 1996 elections clearly demonstrate that the voters strongly endorsed those who had contested on the Congress party ticket. In the first 10 general elections to the Lok Sabha held between 1952 and 1991, the Congress party won nearly 90 per cent of the seats. Even on the four occasions when the party fared badly at the national level (1967, 1977, 1989 and 1991), the relative performance of the party in the state was appreciably better (see Shastri 1999a: 2440). In the 1967 Lok Sabha elections, though the Congress won only 54 per cent of the seats at the national level, its candidates were elected in 67 per cent of the Lok Sabha constituencies. In the 1977 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress had secured just 28 per cent of the seats at the national level, but won more than 90 per cent of the seats in the state. In 1989, the party secured merely 37 per cent of the seats at the national level but captured 96 per cent of the seats in the state. In 1991, the party won 44 per cent of the seats at the national level and 81 per cent of the seats in the state. Karnataka was verily considered a bastion of the Congress when it came to the Lok Sabha elections.

Yet another trend that can be discerned in Karnataka is that the when it comes to who should come to power in the state, the voters have acted differently as compared to the national electorate. In 1978, the Karnataka electorate emphatically endorsed the claims of the Congress even as the Janata Party was in power at the centre. In 1983, though the Congress was in power at the centre, it was voted out of power in the state. In 1985, the Assembly elections were held in the backdrop of the Congress sweep at the national level. The Karnataka voters, however, voted the Janata Party back to power. In the 1989 Assembly elections (Lok Sabha and Assembly elections were held simultaneously) the Congress formed the government in Karnataka while the National Front came to power at the national level; though Narasimha Rao headed a Congress government in Delhi, the voters in the state preferred the Janata Dal as the ruling party. In 1999, while the Congress was voted to power in the state, the NDA

argue that the Congress did not lose the elections (Shastri and Ramaswamy 2009). In the 2009 poll it is difficult to argue as to which was the incumbent government as the state was under President's Rule and it was preceded by a string of short-lived coalition governments.

formed the government in Delhi. In 2004, with the UPA forming the government at the national level, the state has witnessed two coalition governments, one involving the Congress and the Janata Dal (S) and the other involving the Janata Dal (S) and the BJP. In 2008, with the UPA in power in Delhi, the voters paved the way for the formation of a BJP government in the state. In 2009, though the national verdict went in favour of the UPA, the BJP won a majority of the Lok Sabha seats in the state.

It is also interesting to note that the electoral contest in Karnataka has generally involved two major formulations, with the third force being rarely favoured by the voters. If in 1978 the Congress (Brahmananda Reddy) was rejected as a third force, the same fate awaited the Janata Party (JP) in 1989, the Karnataka Congress Party in 1994 and the Janata Dal (S) in 1999. In every election, the two major political formulations have cornered more than 70 per cent of the votes polled. The 2004 electoral verdict was in tune with the 1983 verdict when the nature of electoral competition in the state appeared to be in a transition and is linked to political realignments within and between the regions. The 2008 Assembly elections proved this point with the Janata Dal (S) being relegated to a 'faraway' third position in this election (Shastri and Padmavathi 2009).

The Karnataka electorate has also not favoured regional parties, either in Lok Sabha or Assembly elections. Till the late 1960s the electoral competition in the state was largely between the Congress on the one hand and the Socialist Party/Swatantra Party on the other. After the Congress split in 1969, the two factions of the Congress were the principal political forces in the state. With the formation of the Janata Party in 1977, it became the main opposition party. Subsequently, the Janata Party/Dal and the BJP have emerged as crucial players in the electoral politics of the state along with the Congress. Though regional parties have occasionally been formed they have had limited electoral success. Devraj Urs floated the Kranti Ranga in the 1980s but the party later merged with the Janata Party. Bangarappa formed the Karnataka Congress Party but this party largely played the role of a spoiler (for the Congress) in the 1994 Assembly elections. He subsequently merged the party with the Congress. The Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) has also achieved limited electoral success in Karnataka, winning two seats in 1989, one seat in 1994 and drawing a blank in 1999. While the Lok Shakti did emerge in

Karnataka in 1998, the analysis later in the article draws attention to the limited role and the advantage it derived from the alliance with the BJP.³ Prior to the 2004 polls, the season of cross-party migration and merger of parties was clearly evident and the formation of a regional outfit was not seen as a viable option. Bangarappa's joining the BJP was a clear reflection of this trend. In more recent times, his formation of the state unit of the Samajwadi Party is more a reflection of the limited nature of political options he had. Bangarappa once again decided to return home to the Congress and contested the 2009 Lok Sabha poll on the Congress ticket. Siddaramiah's deciding to join the Congress and not form a regional political outfit also endorses the point being made.

Table 15.1: Caste and Religious Composition of the State of Karnataka

Religion	Caste	Percentage of state population**	Percentage of state population*
Hindus	Upper Castes	3.5	85.5
	Lingayats	15.3	
	Vokkaligas	10.8	
	Other Backward Castes	32.5	
	Scheduled Castes	16.7	
	Scheduled Tribes	6.7	
Muslims			11.6
Christians			1.9
Other Minorities			1.0
Total		85.5	100

Source: Drawn from 2001 Census data.

** Based on figures in the Chinnappa Reddy Commission Report on Backward Classes. Even in the earlier report, the percentage of those belonging to the different castes was more or less the same.

³ Two surveys conducted during the 1999 elections point to interesting trends: A survey on political attitudes and preference of the Karnataka voter that I conducted revealed that more than 54 per cent of the respondents were not at all satisfied with the performance of the Janata Dal government in the state. A DRS poll on performance rating of state governments found that 61 per cent of the respondents (in Karnataka) were dissatisfied with the state government's performance (*The Hindu*, 12 August 1999).

The composite state of Karnataka (earlier called Mysore) came into existence in 1956 subsequent to the reorganisation of states on linguistic lines. Four principal regions became part of the state: 1. Old Mysore region (formerly a part of the princely state of Mysore); 2. Hyderabad-Karnataka region (formerly a part of the territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad); 3. Bombay-Karnataka region (formerly a part of Bombay Presidency of British India); and 4. Old Madras region (formerly part of the Madras Presidency of British India) and Coorg. The Old Mysore region accounts for half the Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies in the state. A quarter of the Lok Sabha seats are in the Bombay-Karnataka region and the rest of the seats are distributed in the other two regions. This article focuses on the regional variations in the state and its implications for the nature and direction of state politics.

The caste profile of the state is distinct in significant ways and caste considerations have played a crucial role in the electoral politics of the state. The Lingayats and Vokkaligas are considered the dominant castes and have been the major players in state politics. Both the Lingayats and Vokkaligas are landowning communities in rural Karnataka. The traditional stronghold of the Lingayats has been the Bombay-Karnataka and Hyderabad-Karnataka region while the Vokkaligas are a major force in the Old Mysore region. The other backward castes (OBCs) — which account for more than one-third of the state's population — have attempted to emerge as a major political force ever since Devraj Urs (the first backward caste leader to become Chief Minister of Karnataka — 1972 to 1979) sought to unite them and break the hegemony enjoyed by the dominant castes. Since the late 1970s, the OBCs have had a powerful impact on the electoral outcomes and their representation in the legislature and state council of ministers has increased (Shastri and Vinod 1990; Shastri 1995). The important OBCs (in numerical terms) include the Kurubas (shepherds) and the Idigas (toddy tappers).⁴

Over the past five decades, electoral politics in the state has witnessed major changes, the most important being the movement from a one-party dominant system to a competitive party system,

⁴ It is my contention that the success of the BJP-Lok Shakti alliance in the 1998 elections was largely due to the BJP, with the Lok Shakti playing a minimal role (see Shastri 1999a: 2444–2445).

paving the way for the possible emergence of a bipolar alliance system. Their implications for state politics and more specifically be composition of the Legislative Assembly have been far reaching.

An Overview of Karnataka's Electoral Politics

An ideal backdrop for the study of Karnataka's politics in the 1990s would be the outcome of the 1983 Assembly elections and the subsequent political developments in the state. Till 1983, the Congress had a near monopoly over power in the state. In the 1983 Assembly elections no party was in a position to secure a clear majority, and the Janata Party (the single largest party) formed a minority government under the leadership of Ramakrishna Hegde, with the outside support of the leftist party and the BJP. The maturity of the Karnataka electorate was strikingly demonstrated in 1984–85 when it elected 24 Congress candidates (out of 28) in the Lok Sabha poll from the state in December 1984 and within a few months in March 1985, expressed a desire that the Janata Party government continue in the state and even gave it a clear majority in the Assembly elections. It is interesting to note that the performance of the Janata Party minority government (1983–85) was more effective as compared to the Janata Party government between 1985 and 1989 when it enjoyed a clear majority in the Assembly. In its second innings, the government was plagued by infighting and an intense internal power struggle. In August 1988, Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde resigned, accepting moral responsibility for the tapping of telephones of political leaders. S. R. Bommai was elected as the leader of the Janata Party to succeed Hegde as Chief Minister. Bommai's government appeared to stumble from crisis to crisis. Even before it completed a year in office, it faced a major crisis when dissident activity surfaced (in April 1989), culminating in the dismissal of the Janata government and declaration of President's Rule.

The 1989 Assembly elections, held after a seven-month spell of President's Rule, saw the Congress return to power in the state with a three-fourths majority in the Assembly (winning 178 of the 224 seats). Never before had any party in the state bagged such a high percentage of seats in the Assembly. The Congress had all the factors going in its favour after the 1989 election results — a fund of goodwill, a steamroller majority and an opposition which had been decimated and was in total disarray. However, gradually the party seemed to lose direction. The voters sounded a warning in the 1991 Lok Sabha

poll by electing only 23 of the 28 Congress candidates. The party did little to remedy the situation.

Having changed its legislature party leader and chief minister thrice in five years, the Congress was plagued by infighting and internal discord, which contributed to a lacklustre performance at the government level. One of the major problems that both Bangarappa and Moily faced as chief ministers was that they had to silently accept a situation where their senior ministers, time and again, expressed their lack of confidence in their leadership. It was the familiar story repeated once again — a public mandate not respected, a public mandate treated with insensitivity and the gradual but sure evaporation of public support — all self inflicted.

It was against this backdrop that the 1994 Assembly elections were held. The emergence of the Janata Dal as the ruling party took many observers by surprise. A party which had just managed to win 24 Assembly seats in 1989 and drew a blank in the 1991 Lok Sabha poll was hardly expected to return to power in spite of the dismal performance of the Congress government. While many attributed the Janata Dal victory to the 'anti-incumbency syndrome', it needs to be remembered that even if the voters were unhappy with the Congress party they had a choice of opting either for the Janata Dal or the BJP. The fact that the Janata Dal secured a majority was indicative of a positive vote for the party (see Shastri 1995).

It also needs to be noted that the Janata Dal victory in Karnataka had little to do with the national agenda of the party. The state leaders made a conscious effort to distance themselves from the development at the national level. The electoral verdict was essentially dictated by local factors and considerations. The emergence of the Janata Dal as a credible alternative to the Congress needs to be viewed in the backdrop of the efforts of the leadership 'troika' (Hegde, Deve Gowda and Bommai) demonstrating their unity and collective leadership (*The Times of India*, Bangalore, 10 December 1994). The effort of these leaders to project the Janata Dal as a 'federal party' found favour with many sections. It must also be said, to the credit of the Janata Dal, that the groundwork for a spirited and well-planned election campaign had been laid long before the formal announcement of the elections.

The 1996 Lok Sabha elections were held within a year and a half of the Janata Dal coming to power in the state. The three major political parties in the state — the Congress, Janata Dal and BJP — had evolved elaborate electoral strategies for the Lok Sabha poll. For all the three,

success in Karnataka was crucial both regionally and nationally. For the Janata Dal, winning a sizable number of seats in the state was vital for the survival of its state government. Earlier, in 1984, Hegde had resigned as Chief Minister on moral grounds, when his party won just four of the 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka. For the Congress, a large contingent from Karnataka was vital as it considered it a 'safe state'. For the BJP, Karnataka was its launching pad in the south and a good performance in the state would help the party inch towards the majority in the Lok Sabha it was hoping to realise.

For the first time in Karnataka, a party other than the Congress secured a majority of the seats in a Lok Sabha election. The Janata Dal won over 57 per cent but secured a little less than 35 per cent of the votes. The Congress, on the other hand, polled just over 30 per cent of the votes but secured only 18 per cent of the seats. It is also interesting to note that there was not much variation in the percentage of votes polled and seats won in the case of both the BJP and the Karnataka Congress Party (KCP).

The percentage of votes polled and seats won by the Congress were the lowest ever polled by the party. In previous Lok Sabha elections, its vote share in the state never fell below 40 per cent. Even in the Assembly elections in the state, the party managed to secure more than 40 per cent of the votes save in 1994 when it polled 27 per cent of the votes. The BJP, which polled less than 25 per cent of the votes in 1996, had secured a higher percentage of votes in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections — nearly 29 per cent — though it secured only four seats than as compared to the six in 1996.

That the Congress secured fewer seats but a higher percentage of votes as compared to the BJP needs to be viewed in the context of the nature of the electoral contest in the 28 constituencies. While the Janata Dal candidates emerged victorious in 16 constituencies, their nominees came second in as many as six other constituencies. Thus, the party registered its presence in 23 of the 28 constituencies. While the Congress won five seats, its nominees came in the second position in as many as 15 constituencies, making a principal contestant in 20 of the 28 constituencies. The BJP, on the other hand, won six seats and came second in another six constituencies, making it a principal contestant in only 12 constituencies. Thus the Congress was a principal contestant in more than 70 per cent of the seats and the BJP was in the first or second position in only a little over 40 per cent of the constituencies. It is also worth noting that while only two of the Janata

Dal and three of the Congress candidates forfeited their deposits, as many as 8 BJP candidates lost their deposits.⁵

The political developments after the 1996 Lok Sabha elections need to be taken into account in any analysis of the 1998 verdict in Karnataka. The Janata Dal's creditable performance in Karnataka in 1996 had important national ramifications, including the elevation of Deve Gowda to the position of Prime Minister. However, the suspension of Ramakrishna Hegde from the Janata Dal, within days of the Deve Gowda government winning the confidence vote, totally shattered the unity which had been so tenuously maintained since 1993. The unity that had been demonstrated by the party leadership had played a crucial role in ensuring the parties victories in 1994 and 1996. The clear erosion of the support for the Janata Dal was apparent from the results of the by-elections to the State Assembly held between 1996 and 1998.

After the 1996 poll, the Congress did make attempts to rethink its electoral strategy in the state. In terms of seats in the Assembly, the party was relegated to the third position. In terms of votes, it managed to come second, way ahead of the BJP. The party made serious attempts to increase its support base among the OBCs and minorities, sections that appeared to have move towards the Janata Dal (see Shastri 1999a). However, the party was unable to capitalise on the failures of the state government. The party also found it difficult to effectively and convincingly explain its support to the United Front (Janata Dal being the main party in the front) at the centre and opposition to the Janata Dal in the state. Above all, serious infighting and absence of an effective leadership at the state level plagued the party.

The 1998 elections heralded the 'true arrival' of the BJP in the south, more specifically, in Karnataka. With the BJP-Lok Shakti alliance winning 16 of the 28 seats in the state, the Congress was once again relegated to the second position with nine seats. The Janata Dal secured the remaining three seats. The BJP-Lok Shakti alliance benefited the BJP more than the Lok Shakti. While assessing the Congress performance it must be noted that though the party registered a 5 per cent increase in its vote share, it was not able to regain its

⁵ Section 158 of the Representation of Peoples Act 1951 states that a candidate who secured less than one-sixth of the valid votes polled forfeits the security deposit.

pre-1996 status in the state. Yet it registered its presence in as many as 27 of the 28 constituencies, with its candidates coming in either the first or second position. The relegation of the Janata Dal to the third position had important implications for state politics, especially as it was the ruling party in the state.

In the past, whenever the ruling party in Karnataka fared badly in the Lok Sabha poll, political compulsions either necessitated the dissolution of the Assembly and holding of fresh elections (1971 and 1984) or resulted in mass defections to the party that emerged victorious in the Lok Sabha poll and the formation of a new government (1980). After the 1998 poll, it was anticipated that with the Janata Dal faring badly, either the ruling party MLAs would join the Lok Shakti in large numbers, resulting in the formation of an alternative government, or the Assembly would be dissolved resulting in fresh elections. However, no such development took place. With Hegde joining the Vajpayee government as a Cabinet Minister, the Janata Dal MLAs in Karnataka were reluctant to join the Lok Shakti in view of their reservations about who would head the alternative government. Further, the BJP was not very enthusiastic about the formation of a Lok Shakti-BJP government with the help of Janata Dal legislators crossing over to the Lok Shakti as such a government would have the Lok Shakti in the driver's seat with the BJP having to play second fiddle. Both the BJP and the Lok Shakti did not appear too keen on an early Assembly election, as this would have resulted in tensions with the alliance. Neither party was willing to take any step that would adversely affect the stability of the BJP-led government at the centre. With the State Assembly elections due in a year, both parties felt that the status quo would be in their best interests.

Sitting in the opposition (both at centre and at the state levels), the Congress saw itself as the 'natural choice' of the electorate in the upcoming Assembly elections. In order to garner the support of the dominant castes, an influential leader from one of these castes was made the KPCC President. Leaders from the other dominant castes and those from backward communities were appointed to important positions in order to balance social equations.

Two developments need to be noted in this context. First, the Congress admitted to its fold several Janata Dal leaders who had joined Hegde's non-political organisation, the Nava Nirmana Vedike. This caused a sense of unease among 'loyalist' Congress workers. Second, internal differences among party leaders continued to surface from time to time.

The split in the Janata Dal on the eve of the 1999 elections was a development of immense political significance. The realignment of political forces was a natural corollary to this development. The split in the Janata Dal was the end of a process that began with the expulsion of Hegde from the party. It needs to be borne in mind that in 1996, Hegde had played a major role in ensuring that Patel became the Chief Minister of the state. Deve Gowda had favoured the candidature of Siddaramaiah, who had to finally remain content with the Deputy Chief Minister's position. Patel had for many years been considered a Hegde loyalist. The blatant interference in the administration by the supporters of Deve Gowda and the inability of the Chief Minister to arrest this trend, the anointing of Siddaramaiah as Chief Minister-in-waiting should the party be returned to power, were all developments which were indicative of the increased tension between Deve Gowda and Patel. With the formal split in the Janata Dal, the group led by Chief Minister Patel — the Janata Dal (U) — decided to align with the Lok Shakti and support the National Democratic Alliance. There was an intense and stormy debate both within the BJP and Lok Shakti on the emerging alliance in the state. The state-level BJP leaders were against the new alliance. Ananth Kumar, a prominent BJP leader from Karnataka who was also a Union Minister, expressed his reservations about the BJP aligning itself with the discredited Janata Dal (U) and favoured the continuation of the BJP-Lok Shakti alliance (*Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 29 July 1999). The Janata Dal (U) appealed to the state leadership of the BJP 'not to be greedy and desist from aspiring for what was beyond their reach' (Ramakrishna Hegde as quoted *The Times of India*, Bangalore, 7 August 1999). Finally, in the interests of unity in the NDA and keeping in mind the importance of the Janata Dal (U) support in Bihar, the Janata Dal (U) was admitted to the NDA (*The Times of India*, Bangalore, 10 August 1999). Heeding the advice of the national leadership of the party, the state BJP leadership too, in spite of its reservations, decided to support the alliance under special circumstances and in the national interest (State BJP President Yediyurappa, *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 25 August 1999). Karnataka was thus moving towards a tri-polar contest in the 1999 poll — Congress-BJP-Janata Dal (U) alliance and Janata Dal (S).

However, the fragility of the BJP-Janata Dal (U) alliance was obvious from the day it was forged. Differences between the alliance partners surfaced at regular intervals and no serious effort was made to iron out the differences. The problem becomes even more complex in

Karnataka, with simultaneous elections to both the Lok Sabha and the State Assembly. The internal contradictions in the NDA alliance were clearly apparent in the State Assembly poll. The NDA was not able to reach an agreement on seat sharing and, as a result, in several of the Assembly constituencies more than one partner in the NDA had put up a candidate. Of the 224 constituencies in Karnataka, the BJP was to put up candidates in 129 and the Janata Dal (U) in 95. In reality the BJP put up candidates in 149 constituencies and the Janata Dal (U) in 112, resulting in both the BJP and Janata Dal (U) candidates remaining in the fray in as many as 38 constituencies. The problem was less acute in the case of the Lok Sabha poll, where the conflict was over the sharing of only one of the 28 seats.

The elections results saw the Congress securing a clear majority in the Assembly and winning a majority of the Lok Sabha seats from the state. The election result clearly indicated that the electorate had not endorsed the BJP–Janata Dal (U) alliance. The voters once again rejected the third force — the Janata Dal (S). Soon after the poll results came trickling in, the state BJP leadership claimed that the party had lost due to the tie-up and the results were a verdict against the Patel government (*Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 9 October 1999).

The election results clearly indicated that the Congress had succeeded in recovering much of the ground it had lost over the last decade. As compared to the previous Lok Sabha elections, the party registered a 9-percentage point increase in its vote's share and the number of seats it won doubled from nine (in 1988) to 18 (in 1999). If the 1994 Assembly elections were to be taken into account, the Congress votes registered a significant increase of over 18 percentage points. In the 1994 Assembly elections, the party had won 36 seats and had increased its tally to 132 (a near four-fold increase) this time around. The BJP–Lok Shakti alliance had polled 38.4 per cent of the votes in 1998. This time around the BJP–Janata Dal (U) polled 40.4 per cent of the votes. However, in 1998, the alliance won 16 of the 28 seats in 1998 and had to be content with 10 of Janata Dal (U) in 1999 — three seats. The decline was in the seats won by the BJP, a fall from 13 seats to seven seats. In the Assembly poll, the BJP increased its tally by four seats (it won 40 seats in 1994 and secured 44 seats in 1999).

While the BJP–Janata Dal (U) alliance failed to secure the endorsement of the electorate, its performance merits attention. First, the Lok Sabha elections. As mentioned earlier, the tally of the BJP partner

(Lok Shakti in 1998 and Janata Dal U in 1999) remained the same. The BJP tally declined by six seats. However, the alliance was a principal contestant in all but two of the 28 constituencies (it won 10 and came second in 16). The trend of bipolar electoral competition in the state has been confirmed by the 1999 electoral verdict.

With the return to power of the NDA at the national level and the formation of the government under Vajpayee's leadership, the non-inclusion of Hegde in the Union Council of Ministers had a major impact on the Janata Dal (U) in the state. Hegde went on record to state that he did not blame the BJP for this development but held his own colleagues in the Janata Dal (U) responsible (*Rediff On the Net*, 18 October 1999). This state unit of the Janata Dal (U) too distanced itself from the NDA. The BJP suffered serious internal divisions, with its legislature party splitting into two. The Congress faced a divided opposition during the five years of its government.

The verdict of the Karnataka voters in the 2004 elections was significant. Opinion polls/exit polls had more or less predicted that the BJP would do well in the Lok Sabha elections in the state while the race for the Vidhana Soudha in Karnataka would be close. This was the second time that the state witnessed a split verdict following simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha. The results in the state became crucial for all the major political parties for a wide range of reasons. For the Congress, it was imperative that it retained its status as the ruling party in the state and provided those vital seats in the Lok Sabha for forming government at the centre. For the BJP, Karnataka was verily its launching pad in the south (Shastri 1999a). This was the only state in the south where it not only had a presence but was also the main partner in the alliance. It hoped to increase seats in the NDA kitty by its contribution from Karnataka. Winning power in the state would have come as a welcome added bonus. For the Janata Dal (S) this was a do-or-die battle. Its continued relevance depended on its reasonably good performance in these elections, especially at the Assembly level. The verdict of the Karnataka voters draws special attention because of the fact that they have clearly distinguished between the Lok Sabha and the Assembly polls. The BJP won 18 of the Lok Sabha seats (60 per cent), the Congress secured eight (30 per cent) and the Janata Dal (S) notched up the remaining two. The Assembly verdict was more divided, with the BJP securing 79 of 224 seats (35 per cent) and its ally, the Janata Dal (U), winning five seats, the Congress nominees being elected in 65 seats (30 per cent);

and the Janata Dal (S) winning 58 seats (26 per cent). Clearly, what the BJP lost at the Assembly level, the Janata Dal (S) gained. There is not much difference in the percentage of seats that the Congress won in the state in the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections (Shastri and Ramaswamy 2009).

In 2004, Karnataka witnessed a clear ticket-splitting, with a significant percentage of voters supporting different parties in the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls. The survey data reveals that 84 per cent of those who voted for the Congress candidates in the Lok Sabha poll endorsed the candidates of the same party in the Assembly polls too. In the case of the BJP, this percentage dropped to around 66 per cent (if the votes transferred to the ally the JD (U) are taken into account). This implies that 34 per cent of those who voted for the BJP in the Lok Sabha poll voted for other candidates in the Assembly polls. The shift was more or less in equal proportion to the Congress, Janata Dal (S) and independents. In the case of those who voted for the Janata Dal (S) at the Lok Sabha polls, around 73 per cent continued to vote for the same party. candidates in the Assembly polls also. The balance shifted in equal measure to the Congress, BJP and other smaller parties. This vote split explains the fact of a Legislative Assembly in Karnataka with no single party with a clear majority on the one hand and on the other, a Lok Sabha contingent from the state with nearly two-thirds majority for the BJP.

After this election, the state saw the formation of a Congress-JD(S) coalition government with the Chief Minister's position going to the Congress and the Deputy Chief Ministership being with the Janata Dal (S). Soon there was a split within the Janata Dal (S) and a section of the party decided to align with the BJP and form a government. Though the BJP had greater numerical strength in the Assembly it conceded the chief ministership to the Janata Dal (S). When the time came for the Janata Dal (S) to hand over the chief ministership to the BJP, it went back on its commitment and the government collapsed. A short-lived BJP-led government could not survive as the Janata Dal (S) withdrew support, paving the way for President's Rule and another election.

These political developments provide the backdrop to the 2008 Assembly election. The BJP fell just three seats short of a majority in this poll. It was able to form a government with the support of the independents. If the performance of the BJP is to be assessed in this poll, its success is linked to its spectacular performance in some regions

and its inability to garner a majority on its own steam is also linked to its poor showing in some other regions. The story of the 2008 Assembly elections is a story of the politics of the regions in the state (Shastri and Padmavathi 2009). The same trend was further entrenched by the 2009 Lok Sabha poll (Shastri et al. 2009).

It would be useful to analyse these election results from a micro-perspective by examining it region-wise. Each result indicates a region-specific trend.

Regions within Regions

To analyse the differences across regions, only the Assembly elections held since 1978 are taken into account.⁶ As mentioned earlier, Karnataka has been traditionally divided into four regions: 1. Old Mysore region — that part of Karnataka which was part of the princely state of Mysore; 2. Hyderabad-Karnataka region — the part of Karnataka which was part of Hyderabad state; 3. Bombay-Karnataka region — the part of Karnataka which was part of the Bombay Presidency; and 4. Madras Presidency regions and Coorg. The Old Mysore region accounts for half the Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies in the state. A quarter of the Lok Sabha seats are in the Bombay-Karnataka region and the rest of the seats are distributed in the other two regions.

Each region has its distinctiveness drawn largely from its past. The regions also have a clear caste matrix which impacts on the nature of political competition and the expression of political choices across regions. The argument in this article is that in critical elections the nature of the result has been defined by the performance of the major players in different regions.

If the 1978 poll is taken into account, the two main players in that election were the Congress and the Janata Party. Table 15.2 clearly indicates that the performance of the Congress was more or less uniform across regions. The reduced percentage of seats it won in the Bombay-Karnataka region was compensated by its better performance in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region. The reverse trend was seen in the case of the Janata Party.

⁶ In this article the argument has been made that Karnataka verdicts are increasingly a response to local considerations. It is for this reason that while understanding the analysis of regions, the Assembly elections alone are taken into account.

Table 15.2: Karnataka Assembly Elections, 1978–2008 Region-wise Seats won by Congress, BJP, Janata Party/Dal (All Figures in Percentage)

	2008 Elections	Old Mysore	Bombay- Krtk	Hyd- Krtk	Madras Presidency Region
Congress		39	24	45	33
BJP		42	72	36	67
JD(S)		16	4	16	0
2004 elections		Old Mysore	Bombay-Krtk	Hyd-Krtk	Madras Pres.
Congress	29	32	25	27	20
BJP	35	25	54	27	73
JD (S)	26	35	7	37	0
1999 elections		Old Mysore	Bombay-Krtk	Hyd-Krtk	Madras Pres.
Congress	59	59	60	60	60
BJP	20	20	16	20	33
JD (S)	4	4	4	10	0
1994 elections		Old Mysore	Bombay-Krtk	Hyd-Krtk	Madras Pres.
Congress	15	10	19	23	27
BJP	18	19	16	6	46
JD	51	54	54	50	20
1989 elections		Old Mysore	Bombay-Krtk	Hyd-Krtk	Madras Pres.
Congress	79	84	72	60	93
BJP	4	1		3	7
JD	11	7	17	10	
1985 elections		Old Mysore	Bombay-Krtk	Hyd-Krtk	Madras Pres.
Congress	30	22	18	44	86
BJP	1	1			7
JP	62	69	72	50	7
1983 elections		Old Mysore	Bombay-Krtk	Hyd-Krtk	Madras Pres.
Congress	37	29	46	60	20
BJP	8	3	7	6	53
JP	42	56	30	27	20
1978 elections		Old Mysore	Bombay-Krtk	Hyd-Krtk	Madras Pres.
Congress	67	66	58	80	66
BJP					
JP	26	29	30	14	20

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

The 1983 poll saw an Assembly with no single party securing a majority. A region-wise analysis shows clear winners. The Congress did reasonably well in the Hyderabad-Karnataka and Bombay-Karnataka regions but fared poorly in the Old Mysore region. The Janata Party was not able to secure majority on its own simply because its good

performance was limited to the Old Mysore region. It was able to capture a little over one-fourth of the seats in the crucial Hyderabad-Karnataka and Bombay-Karnataka regions. The trend changed in 1985. The Janata Dal was able to secure a majority because it improved upon its earlier performance (albeit marginally) in the Old Mysore region but showed a spectacular improvement in the Bombay-Karnataka region (from 30 to 72 per cent of seats) and to a lesser extent the Hyderabad-Karnataka region (27 to 50 per cent).

The Congress record in 1989 was largely because it did well in the four regions. In the Old Mysore region (which accounts for more than half the seats) it pushed back the Janata Dal and in the Madras Presidency and Coorg regions it trounced the BJP.

Similarly, in 1994, the return of the Janata Dal to power was largely because it was able to register its presence not merely in Old Mysore but in the Hyderabad-Karnataka and Bombay-Karnataka regions. The rise of the BJP too is linked to its registering its presence in all the four regions. The party did exceptionally well in the Madras Presidency region but was still to gain a firm hold in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region.

The Congress return to power in 1999 was again on account of its good performance in all the four regions. It is important to note that while the BJP seat share did not change much (1994–1999), it improved its performance in the Hyderabad region.

In 2004, the story that explains the inability of any one party to secure a clear majority lies in the regions. The Congress decline was uniform across the regions. The BJP, which came up with its best ever performance in the Assembly polls, failed to consolidate in the Old Mysore and Hyderabad-Karnataka regions. Its inability to secure a majority on its own is linked to this factor. The Janata Dal (S), on the other hand, fared poorly in the Madras Presidency and Bombay-Karnataka regions and did exceptionally well in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region. It can be argued that the good performance of the JD (S) in this region was at the cost of the BJP and prevented the BJP from being able to secure a majority on its own.

2008 saw an interesting trend. The BJP improved on its previous performance in the Bombay-Karnataka region. It did marginally better in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region and slipped slightly in the Madras Presidency region. Though it improved in the Old Mysore region (at the cost of the Janata Dal [S]), its record here prevented it from securing a majority on its own (Shastri and Padmavathi 2009).

Thus, in two critical elections, 1983 and 2004, the unclear verdict is explained by the fact that the party which emerged as the single largest party was not able to consolidate its presence in one of the regions of the state. In 2008, the BJP fell short of the majority because of its gaining a limited number of seats in the Old Mysore and Hyderabad-Karnataka regions.

The analysis also shows that even though the Old Mysore region accounts for half of the Karnataka seats, a party that secures a majority needs to do well not merely in this region but in Bombay-Karnataka and Hyderabad-Karnataka regions also. In a sense, it is these two regions which tilt the verdict.

The 'regions within regions' are also linked to the social composition of the state. The two dominant castes of the state have a significant influence in different regions. The Vokkaligas are largely a force in the Old Mysore regions while the Lingayats are a force to reckon with in the Bombay-Karnataka and Hyderabad-Karnataka regions. The non-dominant OBCs have pockets of influence in each of the regions. The capacity of parties to generate support across caste groups also plays a role in defining their performance.

Conclusion

The analysis above draws attention to the fact that the nature of electoral verdicts in Karnataka is verily a by-product of the trends in the regions. The dynamics of the social coalitions that emerge in a region and the nature of the electoral context (bipolar or tri-polar) in the regions significantly define and determine the final electoral verdict.

Elections in the country today, as pointed out by Yadav (2009), can be understood only when the centrality of the role of the states in the emerging national trends is taken into account. Similarly, within each state, the impact of the regions is an important point of reference. The election results in Karnataka appear to be a vindication of such a postulate. With the 2004 elections, the state has moved from an earlier bipolarity towards a competitive multi-polarity, which has once again been confirmed in the 2008 Assembly elections.

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