

Lok Shakti in Karnataka

Regional Party in Bipolar Alliance System

SANDEEP SHASTRI

The Background

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This paper attempts to locate the two-year old party, the Lok Shakti within the broader framework of Karnataka's electoral politics. The state electorate has largely not favoured regional parties, either in the Lok Sabha or in the assembly elections. Karnataka's electoral politics has mostly witnessed a bipolar competition between two major national parties/alliances, thus squeezing the third force out of the competition. The limited success of Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti can therefore be linked to its being part of an alliance that was seen as a major player in the bipolar competition.

SANDEEP SHASTRI

The Lok Shakti experiment in Karnataka provides a window of opportunity to assess the political trends in the state in the latter half of the 1990s. The Lok Shakti represents, in significant ways, a branch of the 'Janata Parivar', an estranged sibling seeking justice and its due share of the 'ancestral political legacy'. The Lok Shakti was formed by Ramakrishna Hegde, as a 'vehicle' to carry forward his political career and challenge his traditional rival within the Janata Party/Dal, Deve Gowda, who had been instrumental in ensuring his expulsion from the party. Formed in February 1997, the Lok Shakti was a key player in Karnataka politics for a little over two years. In the run-up to the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the party decided to merge with the Janata Dal (U). The merger plans were put on hold subsequent to the elections, in view of the differences among the leaders. With Hegde more or less retiring from active politics after these polls, the Lok Shakti gradually faded away and the Election Commission, too, derecognised the party in September 1999. This paper attempts to locate the Lok Shakti within the broader framework of Karnataka's electoral politics. The Lok Shakti is, in many ways, symbolic of the regional parties that have been formed (and also dissolved) in Karnataka. The strategy adopted by the Lok Shakti to carve out its own unique political/electoral space is indicative of the approach adopted by regional formulations in a state which has been witness to a near bipolar competition.

The Background

The formation of the Lok Shakti, its brief role in state politics and its ultimate eclipse are all intrinsically linked to the career graph of Ramakrishna Hegde. To assess the rise and growth of the Lok Shakti, it would be necessary to briefly trace the political developments that necessitated the formation of a new political party, on the one hand, and Ramakrishna Hegde's role in Karnataka politics on the other. In the 1960s, Hegde was a prominent minister in the Congress government headed by Nijalingappa and later Veerendra Patil. The Congress split saw Hegde lining up with the Congress (O). With the formation of the Janata Party, Hegde gravitated towards national politics and became the general secretary of the party. He returned to state politics in 1983, to head the first non-Congress government in the state. It is important to record that Hegde was largely seen as a compromise candidate who could ensure unity among the various factions

in the state unit of the Janata Party and also run a minority government with the outside support of both the BJP and the Communists. He steadily consolidated his support base both within the party and in the state and led the Janata Party to victory in the 1985 assembly elections. A leadership troika gradually emerged within the state Janata Party, consisting of Hegde, Deve Gowda and Bommai. The social base of this leadership was crucial given the fact that the vokkaligas and lingayats are the two dominant castes in the state and enjoyed a near monopoly of power for several years.¹ Hegde was a brahmin with support among the lingayats (a dominant caste in northern Karnataka), Deve Gowda a vokkaliga (a dominant caste in the Old Mysore region) and Bommai a lingayat from northern Karnataka (for details see Shastri 1991). A leadership conflict within the party soon surfaced, with serious differences emerging between Hegde and Deve Gowda. This deprived Deve Gowda of the opportunity to succeed Hegde as chief minister when the occasion arose in August 1988, with Bommai being backed by Hegde.² The infighting within the party triggered off a series of developments leading to the ultimate fall of the Bommai government in April 1989. Meanwhile, the Janata Party had been rechristened as the Janata Dal. In Karnataka, the Deve Gowda faction rejected the change of label and decided to keep the Janata Party alive. A divided Janata Party/Dal was routed in the 1989 assembly poll and the Congress returned to power with a massive majority.

The early 1990s was a testing time for the Janata Party/Dal leaders. At the state level, they were in the opposition. At the national level, a significant chunk of the National Front was composed of members of parliament from the north, with very limited representation for Karnataka. While Hegde did become the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, he quit the post when a commission of inquiry investigating into some decisions taken by his government made serious allegations of misuse of power. Hegde then lost from the Bagalkot (north Karnataka) Lok Sabha constituency in the 1991 poll. Deve Gowda, on the other hand, was elected to the Lok Sabha in the same election from his home district of Hassan. With the 1994 assembly elections approaching, the leaders of the various factions of the Janata Party/Dal in Karnataka decided to bury their differences and work for party unity. As the elections approached, the leadership troika (Hegde, Deve Gowda and Bommai) undertook a joint tour of the state and projected a picture of unity. The party also made a conscious effort to develop a second line

of leadership and drew members from the non-dominant backward castes, dalits and minorities for these positions. The party made a serious and conscious effort to expand its social base [Shastri 1995a] among the backward castes. It is also important to record that there appeared to be a tacit understanding among the leaders that in the event of the Janata Dal being in a position to form the government, Deve Gowda would be the chief minister. While this was not explicitly stated, it was implied in many of the actions of the leadership and the statements issued. Deve Gowda asserted that "Mr Hegde has made it clear that he will not contest for the leadership and that his vote is for Deve Gowda" [Shastri 1995b:8]. The Janata Dal was voted to power and even before the party could bask in the sunshine of its victory, the infighting in the party surfaced. The seed of latter day developments culminating in the formation of the Lok Shakti was clearly sown in the leadership struggle that emerged after it was clear that the Janata Dal would form the government. A day before the election of the leader of the Janata Dal legislature party, Deve Gowda maintained that the election would be a smooth affair and hoped that Hegde and Bommai would "guide us ...(and) correct me if I go wrong" (*Deccan Herald*, December 11, 1994 emphasis added). While Deve Gowda was ultimately chosen as the consensus candidate, the comments by the party observer, Bijju Patnaik, were indicative of the underlying tensions. Patnaik asserted that if "Hegde had insisted that an election should decide the leader, he would have certainly won. But that would have divided the party today itself... By graciously stepping aside and allowing Deve Gowda to become the leader ... he has really emerged as a leader of the state" (*Indian Express*, December 12, 1994 emphasis added; also see Shastri 1995b:58-61). While the Janata Dal government did perform reasonably well, the tension between Hegde and Deve Gowda was obvious to the keen political observer. The truce remained till the 1996 Lok Sabha poll. The creditable performance of the Janata Dal in Karnataka in these polls was a combination of several factors – a well organised campaign, goodwill enjoyed by the 17-month Janata Dal state government and the increase in support among the backward castes and minorities. The Karnataka result had important national ramifications. The most significant was the election of Deve Gowda as the leader of the United Front. The first to express shock and surprise at the decision was Ramakrishna Hegde. When the United Front questioned the decision of president Shankar Dayal Sharma to invite the leader of the single largest party (BJP) to form the government instead of the leader of the United Front (Deve Gowda), Hegde supported the president's decision. Later, the BJP government resigned and the United Front government assumed office under Deve Gowda's leadership. Within days of the Deve Gowda government securing a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha, Hegde was expelled from the Janata Dal for 'anti-party activities'. The tension between these two traditional rivals in Karnataka had come full circle. While many in the Janata Dal (both at the national level and in Karnataka) expressed their anguish at the development, very few actually resigned from the party and came out in open support of Hegde.³

RNNV and Lok Shakti

While there was tremendous sympathy for Hegde among Janata Dal legislators in Karnataka, very few were willing to quit the party and support Hegde. Those who openly aligned themselves with Hegde were principally political supporters who had never

been legislators or those defeated in the previous assembly elections. Hegde, too, decided to adopt a policy of wait-and-watch and did not wish to destabilise the state government headed by J H Patel, a close associate and supporter. Hegde decided to launch a non-political organisation called the Rashtriya Nava Nirmana Vedithe (RNNV). The objective of launching the RNNV was to provide a platform for Hegde's supporters among Janata Dal legislators to associate with his activities even without violating the provisions of the anti-defection law. It was not uncommon to notice legislators supporting the Patel-led Janata Dal government on the floor of the house and participating in RNNV activities outside the house.

In February 1997, Hegde decided to launch the Lok Shakti as a political party. Even while retaining the RNNV as a non-political organisation, the Lok Shakti was created for those who were willing to openly align with Hegde. A factor that appeared to be favouring the Lok Shakti was the poor performance of the Janata Dal government in Karnataka under the leadership of J H Patel. The manner in which the government functioned and the forces that appeared to call the shots were clearly indicative of the influence and power wielded by a segment of the dominant castes, the vokkaligas. The lingayats (especially in northern Karnataka) were increasingly convinced, in spite of a person from their community being the chief minister, that the vokkaliga community appeared to manipulate and manage power. This became even more apparent after Deve Gowda (a vokkaliga) resigned as prime minister. His supporters soon began interfering (both directly and indirectly) in the state administration. This resulted in the gradual alienation of the non-dominant backward communities, minorities and dalits. A tangential development was the polarisation on caste lines within the state Janata Dal when Laloo Prasad Yadav rebelled against the national leadership of the party (which included Deve Gowda). The OBC leaders in the party at the state level used every occasion to express their displeasure at the manner in which the vokkaligas appeared to control and direct government machinery at the state level. Several OBC leaders in the state Janata Dal, who were staunch supporters of Deve Gowda, openly expressed their dissent at the manner in which Deve Gowda's confidants were attempting to use the state machinery to further their own caste/personal interests. The clear erosion of the support base of the Janata Dal was evident in the by-elections to the state legislative assembly held between 1996 and 1998. The Lok Shakti was attempting to capitalise on the discontent in the Janata Dal. Hegde gave clear expression to his desire to exploit the situation to his advantage, when he characterised the Janata Dal as 'dying and diseased' when leaders like Bommai suggested that he rejoin the party (*Indian Express*, December 12, 1997). While the Lok Shakti did not test the electoral waters in the various by-elections, it was keeping its options open in terms of alliances in view of the fluid political situation in the state.

1998 Lok Sabha Elections

With the announcement of the 1998 Lok Sabha poll, Karnataka witnessed fast-paced political changes. The BJP saw the elections as an opportunity to assert its presence in the state. The party had already emerged as the principal opposition in the 1994 assembly elections. However, the extent of support that the party enjoyed across the state was still limited to certain pockets [Shastri 1995b:20-32]. With the 1998 Lok Sabha poll approaching, the

party found itself in an advantageous position as it could highlight the failures of both the United Front government at the centre and the Janata Dal government in the state. In order to increase its influence in northern Karnataka (especially among the lingayat community), the party decided to enter into an alliance with the Lok Shakti. The Lok Shakti too needed the support of the BJP in order to assert its presence in the state. Given the nature of the support base of both the BJP and the Lok Shakti, the alliance was mutually complementary. The two parties realised that the alliance would help both widen their support base. The Lok Shakti also realised that in a state where bipolar competition was the norm, a third force is of little relevance. Aligning with the BJP appeared to be the best option. The party hoped that in the event of the alliance emerging victorious, an exodus from the Janata Dal to the Lok Shakti would destabilise the state government and lead to the formation of a Lok Shakti-led coalition (party spokesperson in interview, Rediff on the Net, February 9, 1998).

Of the 28 seats in Karnataka, the BJP put up candidates in 18, with the Lok Shakti fielding its nominees for 10 seats. The BJP won 13 of the seats it contested and three of the Lok Shakti candidates emerged victorious, taking the alliance tally to 16. It is important to record the fact that the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance appeared to benefit the BJP more than the Lok Shakti. Of the 13 seats the BJP won, five were seats it retained from the previous elections. Another five seats were those where it had come a close second in the 1996 poll. Only three seats were those where the party had actually fared badly in 1996. However, all the three seats were in the Old Mysore region, where the influence of the Lok Shakti was very limited.

The Lok Shakti was in a position to win only three of the 10 seats it contested. Its candidates came second in another five seats, making it a principal contestant in eight of the 10 seats. It is also important to note that in six of the seven constituencies where its candidates were defeated, the seat had been won by the Janata Dal in 1996 and now returned a Congress candidate.

The capacity of the Lok Shakti to ensure the switch of the Janata Dal votes to the Lok Shakti/BJP alliance appeared to be severely limited. An analysis of the votes polled would show that the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance polled over 38 per cent of the vote. In the 1996 Lok Sabha poll, the BJP has polled around 25 per cent of the votes. Thus, the increase in the vote share of the alliance was almost 13 percentage points. Further, the Janata Dal secured 35 per cent of the votes in the 1996 poll. In 1998, their votes share fell to less than 22 per cent, a decline of 13 percentage points. Thus the loss of the Janata Dal seemed to be the gain of the alliance. However, a deeper analysis reveals quite another story. The data emerging from the national election study 1998, conducted by the CSDS, shows that only 26 per cent of Janata Dal supporters shifted alliance to the Lok Shakti/BJP. Both the Congress and the BJP were able to retain the support of a little over half of those who voted for them in 1996. The shifting social base of the major political formulations (a point discussed later) provides a more plausible explanation.

A regionwise analysis of the results is also indicative of the support base of the Lok Shakti.⁴ All the Lok Shakti victories were in the Bombay-Karnataka region and the party drew a blank in the Old Mysore and Hyderabad-Karnataka regions. Its poor performance in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region was a matter of concern for the party as it had fielded candidates in three of the five constituencies here, claiming them to be their strongholds [Shastri 1999].

The CSDS survey also throws some light on the social base of the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance. One factor that prompted the BJP to seek the support of the Lok Shakti was to secure the vote of the powerful lingayat community in northern Karnataka. It was believed that Hegde had considerable influence in this community and could swing the votes in favour of the alliance. However, survey data reveals that the votes of this community were divided between the Congress and the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance. The fact that the Lok Shakti itself fared badly in northern Karnataka was indicative of its not being able to muster support among the dominant caste. The alliance was able to garner significant support among the non-dominant backward castes. The survey data reveals that a little over 37 per cent of the non-dominant OBC votes were garnered by the alliance. This trend, BJP leaders argue, has more to do with the increase in the support for the BJP among these sections and not because of the alliance with the Lok Shakti.

The BJP saw its 1998 performance as a natural movement forward from the 1991 and 1996 Lok Sabha poll. Hegde, on the other hand, asserted that the Lok Shakti had a major role to play in the good performance of the alliance and if the BJP leaders believed that the role of the Lok Shakti was marginal, it was a clear case of 'not giving credit where it is due' (*Frontline* 15:6: April 1998). The desire to claim credit for victory on the part of both alliance partners was indicative of the undercurrent of distrust, which surfaced in significant ways in later years. The alliance was clearly for mutual convenience, with little conviction on either side.

Post-Poll Developments

The Lok Shakti hailed the victory of the alliance as a vindication of the stand taken by the party and a fitting response by the voters to the expulsion of Hegde from the Janata Dal (*Deccan Herald*,

Table 1: 1998 Lok Sabha Elections in Karnataka

Party	Votes Polled (Per Cent)	Seats Won
BJP	26.9	13
Lok Shakti	11.5	03
Congress	36.0	09
Janata Dal	21.5	03

Source: GoK (1998).

Table 2: 1998 Lok Sabha Elections in Karnataka – Principal Contestants

Principal Contestants: First and Second Positions	Number of Constituencies
BJP-Congress	12
BJP-Janata Dal	01
Lok Shakti-Congress	03
Congress-BJP	02
Congress-Lok Shakti	05
Congress-Janata Dal	02
Janata Dal-Congress	03

Source: As for Table 1.

Table 3: 1998 Lok Sabha Elections in Karnataka – Regionwise Performance

Region	BJP	Lok Shakti	Congress	Janata Dal	Total
Old Mysore	6	-	6	3	15
Hyderabad-Karnataka	2	-	2	-	4
Bombay-Karnataka	2	3	1	-	6
Coastal Karnataka	3	-	-	-	3
Total	13	3	9	3	28

March 22, 1998). In the past, whenever the ruling party in Karnataka fared badly in the Lok Sabha elections, political compulsions either necessitated the dissolution of the assembly and holding of fresh elections (1971 and 1984) or caused mass defections to the party that emerged victorious in the Lok Sabha poll and the formation of a new government (1980). The anticipation that a similar trend would be seen after the 1998 verdict was clearly apparent. In an interview, Hegde categorically stated that such a switchover from the Janata Dal to the Lok Shakti was a distinct possibility (*Frontline* 15:6: April 1998). However, no such development took place. With Hegde joining the Vajpayee government as cabinet minister, Janata Dal MLAs were reluctant to join the Lok Shakti in view of their reservations about who would head the alternative government. It can be argued that if Hegde had declined a central ministership and concentrated on building up the Lok Shakti in the state, it may well have been possible to encourage a larger number of legislators to join the Lok Shakti. It appears as if Hegde was more keen to be a part of the government at the centre and felt that the Lok Shakti had served the purpose of avenging the humiliation heaped on him by Deve Gowda. Time and again, the Lok Shakti cadres appealed to Hegde to return to state politics. Speaking at the second anniversary of the formation of the Lok Shakti, Hegde promised to consider resigning from the central ministry to focus on Karnataka (*The Times of India*, February 16, 1999). He subsequently decided to remain in the union council of ministers. In view of his ambivalent stand on returning to state politics, on the one hand, and his continued alliance with the BJP on the other, many of his supporters decided to join the Congress Party.

It must also be stressed that the BJP, too, 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. Further, both the BJP and the Lok Shakti were not too keen on an early assembly poll as it had the potential of destabilising the already fragile alliance at the centre.

Run-up to 1999 Lok Sabha Elections

The Lok Shakti/BJP alliance came under strain at regular intervals. Statements were often made by the BJP leadership about its capacity to go it alone in Karnataka. The Lok Shakti was often characterised as a liability. One BJP leader even went to the extent of stating that Hegde was looking for a chariot as his party was organisationally weak. "Why should we provide it to him? He will have the cake and eat it too" (Rediffmail News, February 16, 1999). The Lok Shakti, on the other hand, dared the BJP to go it alone in the state and face the consequences. In fact, Hegde sought to renegotiate the basis of the alliance, by demanding sharing of seats on an equal basis (Rediffmail News, February 16, 1999). The alliance thus came under severe strain.

The political realignment that Karnataka saw in the run-up to the 1999 elections, was in some ways the natural by-product of the expulsion of Hegde from the Janata Dal (and later the formation of the Lok Shakti), on the one hand, and the continued infighting within the state unit of the Janata Dal, on the other. The ruling Janata Dal in the state continued with its lacklustre performance. Differences between Deve Gowda and chief minister Patel surfaced from time to time. Frustrated by the increasing interference of Deve Gowda's supporters in the state

administration, the chief minister seemed to have lost interest in governing and was merely biding his time. As mentioned earlier, chief minister Patel was viewed with great suspicion by the Deve Gowda camp as he was seen as a Hegde loyalist. All these developments resulted in a split in the Janata Dal, with the Patel faction (with the active support of Janata Dal leaders at the national level) deciding to align with the Lok Shakti and seeking entry into the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The Deve Gowda faction opposed the move and the split in the party was formalised. Those supporting the move to join the NDA were christened the Janata Dal (United) while those who wished to retain the identity of the party as part of the third force called themselves the Janata Dal (Secular). The Lok Shakti too announced its decision to merge with the Janata Dal (U) and sought a more powerful role and say within the NDA, especially in Karnataka. Three factors need to be taken into account when analysing these developments. Firstly, the Janata Dal (U) did not merely have a presence in Karnataka but was also a force in Bihar. In Bihar, the Samata Party too had merged into the Janata Dal (U). Thus at the national level, the politics of the Janata Dal (U) was not merely defined by political cues from Karnataka, but the Bihar factor played a more dominant role. Secondly, Karnataka was to have simultaneous polls to the assembly. The split in the Janata Dal needs to be seen in this context too. Finally, the Lok Shakti leadership was keen on the larger formulation – the Janata Dal (U) – as it served its twin purposes of reducing the role and influence of Deve Gowda – who now headed a rump Janata Dal (S) – on the one hand and being a part of a larger national political party, which increased its bargaining power, on the other.

The BJP did not favour the developments in Karnataka. Its state leadership felt that if at all the party wished to enter into an alliance in Karnataka, it should be with the Lok Shakti and not the Janata Dal (U). It felt that the poor performance of the state government may have an adverse impact on the alliance. The suggestion was also made that the Patel faction of the Janata Dal could merge with the Lok Shakti (*The Times of India*, July 27, 1999). The BJP was now keen to deal with the 'regional' Lok Shakti rather than a larger and more 'national' Janata Dal (U).

The state leadership of the BJP had no choice but to accept the Janata Dal (U) as part of the NDA in view of the national leadership of the party endorsing the development. Vajpayee even termed the Janata Dal (U) as an 'asset' to the NDA (*The Times of India*, August 10, 1999).

1999 Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections

The fragility of the BJP-Janata Dal (U) alliance was apparent from the day it was forged. Especially in Karnataka, differences between the alliance partners surfaced at regular intervals and no serious attempt was made to iron them out. The issue was further complicated by the simultaneous conduct of Lok Sabha and assembly elections in the state. The internal convulsions in the Janata Dal (U) further compounded the confusion. The various factions within the party – the erstwhile Lok Shakti, new entrants and Janata Dal – bitterly fought over ticket distribution. The seat-sharing agreement between the partners was respected more in its breach [Shastri 2001:66-67].

The election results were clearly a setback for the BJP/Janata Dal (U) alliance. When the Lok Sabha results are analysed, the clear loser was actually the BJP. Its tally came down from 13 seats

to seven. It can be argued that the alliance partner neither gained nor lost, as the Lok Shakti won three seats in 1998 and once again won three seats in its new avatar as the Janata Dal (U). The loss for the BJP was significant. A closer analysis reveals that the seats that it lost were those where, in the assembly segments, there was intense rivalry between the alliance partners and in the process the votes got transferred to the Congress.

The CSDS post-poll survey provided sufficient indicators for the failure of the BJP/Janata Dal (U) alliance and the success of the Congress. While the Congress was able to retain more than 80 per cent of its vote, in the case of the the BJP alliance it plummeted to less than 70 per cent. The alliance lost more than 25 per cent of its voters to the Congress. Most significantly, the Janata Dal (U) was able to secure for the alliance only 50 per cent of the Janata Dal vote of 1998, the balance being equally divided between the Congress and the Janata Dal (S) [Yadav et al 1999:47]. The sharp fall in the votes polled by the third force is significant. In 1998, the Janata Dal polled 21.5 per cent of the votes. The decline in the vote share of the third force is directly proportionate to the rise in the Congress vote. In 1999, the Janata Dal (S) polled less than 11 per cent of the votes. The percentage of votes polled by the BJP alliance remained largely unchanged. The contribution of the Janata Dal (U) to the Lok Shakti vote share was a mere 0.8 per cent.

The poor performance of the BJP-led alliance can also be analysed in terms of its social base. The CSDS post-poll survey clearly indicates that the Congress was able to secure the support of significant sections from the non-dominant OBCs, minorities, dalits and a section of one dominant caste – the vokkaligas. A substantial segment from among the other dominant caste (lingayats) continued to support the BJP-led alliance. However, the alliance was not able to repeat the 1998 performance in spite of the support of a crucial segment of the dominant caste because it failed to retain the non-dominant OBC votes. The hope that the Janata Dal (U) would not merely secure the Lok Shakti votes, but also garner the Janata Dal votes does not appear to have been fulfilled.

It can be argued that if the Lok Shakti had retained its identity and contested the elections in alliance with the BJP, the alliance could have performed much better. It is clear that the expansion of the alliance did not significantly enhance their vote share. On the other hand, the alliance had to defend the performance of the state government and also endure the infighting caused by the need to accommodate a larger number of interests. However, the Lok Shakti saw the inclusion of the Janata Dal (U) as a strategy to increase its bargaining capacity within the alliance and also sideline the leaders who were responsible for the expulsion of Hegde from the Janata Dal. While the second aim was achieved, the beneficiary was neither the Lok Shakti nor the alliance but the Congress. The survey data further points to the fact that voting choices are not made on the basis of simple electoral arithmetic. The JD, which emerged as a popular choice in 1996, lost its support among various sections of society in the 1998 election. This loss was across different social sections. The national elections survey data for 1998 shows that both JD and Lok Shakti were able to secure vokkaliga and lingayat votes in equal proportion. But both were actually more dependent on the votes of other OBCs. As shown in Table 6, the vote share of JD (U) and Lok Shakti among various sections is far less than their combined vote share in 1996. The implication is simple: votes have moved

away from both the factions and gone in favour of the BJP and the Congress. In fact, the BJP has been the main beneficiary and the fragmentation of the Janata family in Karnataka has facilitated the entry of the BJP in state politics, making it possible for the latter to occupy the second 'pole' of the bipolar politics in the state.

Emerging Issues

With the return to power of the NDA at the national level and the formation of government under Vajpayee's leadership, the erstwhile Lok Shakti in Karnataka was in for a shock. In the list submitted by the Janata Dal (U) for inclusion in the union council of ministers, Hegde's name was not included. To represent Karnataka, another MP who had won on the Janata Dal (U) ticket but did not hail from the Lok Shakti, was included as a minister of state (V Srinivaas Prasad, who later joined the Samata Party and then went on to be part of the JD(S)). No representative from the Lok Shakti was included in the government. Hegde has gone 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 October 18, 1999). This development saddened the Lok Shakti leaders, who felt that the Lok Shakti should be revived.

Hegde's failing health and his unhappiness about the manner in which his own party colleagues betrayed him, resulted in his distancing himself from active politics. The enthusiasm to revive the Lok Shakti was clearly not evident. At the national level too, the Janata Dal (U) broke up once again, with the Samata Party asserting its independent identity. The state unit of the Janata Dal (U) also, distanced itself from the NDA.

Table 4: 1999 Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections in Karnataka

Party	Per Cent of Votes Polled (LS)	No of Seats Won (LS)	Per Cent of Votes Polled (A)	No of Seats Won (A)
Congress	45.4	18	41.04	132
BJP	26.9	7	20.66	44
Janata Dal (U)	12.3	3	13.61	18
Janata Dal (S)	-	-	10.44	10

Source: GoK (1999a, 1999b).

Table 5: 1999 Lok Sabha Elections in Karnataka – Movement of Votes 1998 to 1999

	INC	BJP+	JD(S)
INC	81	16	2
BJP+	27	69	3
JD	24	49	22

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

Table 6: Social Base of Janata Dal-Lok Shakti – 1996 and 1999 (Per cent)

Caste/Community	JD:1996	JD(U): 1999	JD(S): 1999
Upper caste	28	9	9
Vokkaliga	63	9	18
Lingayat	29	10	3
Non-dominant OBCs	42	15	10
SC	31	19	6
ST	34	27	9
Muslim	46	6	2
Others	35	-	-

Source: CSDS Data unit.

More recently, efforts were made to revive various factions of the Janata Dal. This resulted in the formation of the All-India Progressive Janata Dal (AIPJD). The Janata Dal (S), led by Deve Gowda, decided to retain its separate identity. The death of Hegde in January 2004 resulted in the near-disintegration of the AIPJD and whatever was left of the Lok Shakti. Most of the leaders of the AIPJD and Lok Shakti have joined either the Congress or the BJP. A few have decided to become a part of the Janata Dal (S). At the national level the Samata Party has once again merged with the Janata Dal (U) and an effort is on to ensure that the AIPJD leaders who still remain in the party in Karnataka become a part of the NDA. However, the attempt to revive the Janata Dal (U) is more in the context of developments in Bihar and has little to do with Karnataka politics.

The brief two-year presence of the Lok Shakti on the Karnataka electoral scene needs to be viewed in the backdrop of larger issues in Karnataka's electoral politics. The state electorate has largely not favoured regional parties, either in Lok Sabha or assembly elections. Electoral competition was largely between the Congress on the one hand and the Socialist Party/Swatantra Party on the other till the late 1960s. After the Congress split in 1969, the two factions of the Congress were the principal political forces. With the formation of the Janata Party in 1977, it became the principal opposition party at the state level. The BJP emerged as a third force in Karnataka politics with the 1983 assembly elections. Ever since, it has attempted to consolidate its electoral base. Though regional parties have occasionally been formed, they have had limited electoral success. Devraj Urs floated the Kranti Ranga in the early 1980s but the party later merged with the Janata Party. Bangarappa, a former chief minister of Karnataka, broke away from the Congress to form the Karnataka Congress Party in 1993. In the 1994 assembly elections, that party secured 10 seats in the 224-member house, way behind the Janata Dal, Congress and BJP. It was principally responsible for damaging the prospects of Congress candidates in several constituencies, thus enabling the Janata Dal and BJP candidates to emerge victorious [Shastri 1995:44]. The Karnataka Congress Party later merged with the Congress. Yet another regional party, the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) formed to protect the interests of farmers, also performed dismally at the polls. It has now divided into two factions, and with the death of its founder, its future role in Karnataka's electoral politics is debatable. The limited success of the Lok Shakti can be linked to it being part of an alliance. Karnataka's electoral politics has mostly witnessed a bipolar competition between two major national parties/alliances, thus squeezing the third force out of the competition. The Lok Shakti was in a position to achieve success in 1998 (and possibly 1999 as the Janata Dal (U)) because it was part of an alliance that was seen as a major player in the bipolar competition. This factor seems to have influenced Bangarappa, who has now (March, 2004) quit the Congress once again but not formed a regional outfit like in the past, and has instead joined the BJP.

The social composition of the Karnataka electorate, with the existence of two dominant castes, has also favoured the emergence of a bipolar system, resulting in the third force being squeezed out. The presence of at least two major national parties in Karnataka has made it imperative that regional outfits like the Lok Shakti align with a national party in order to carve out a space for themselves in the electoral politics of the state. The bipolar nature of political competition has emerged with greater

clarity with every election, and the 2004 polls appear all set to further endorse this trend. **EW**

Address for correspondence:
sshastri@eth.net

Notes

1. The caste factor has played a crucial role in electoral politics in Karnataka. The lingayats and vokkaligas are considered the dominant castes and have been major players in state politics. The traditional strongholds of the lingayats have been the Bombay-Karnataka and Hyderabad-Karnataka regions, while the vokkaligas are a major force in the Old Mysore region. While the lingayats and vokkaligas account for 10.8 per cent and 15.3 per cent of the state population (together a little over 16 per cent), over the last four decades, a majority of the members of the state assembly and a significantly large number of Lok Sabha members have belonged to these two communities [Shastri forthcoming]. The non-dominant backward castes emerged as a major political force when Devraj Urs became the chief minister in 1972. Urs was the first chief minister who belonged to the non-dominant backward castes. Urs attempted to unite the non-dominant backward castes and thus break the hegemony enjoyed by the dominant castes. Since the late 1970s, the influence of the non-dominant castes on electoral outcomes and their representation in the legislature and state council of ministers has grown [Shastri and Latha forthcoming].
2. Hegde resigned on moral grounds when it was alleged that his government had ordered the tapping of the telephones of opposition leaders.
3. When Deve Gowda resigned as Karnataka chief minister, in order to be sworn in as prime minister, J H Patel was elected to head the Janata Dal Legislature Party and became chief minister; Patel was actively supported by Hegde and was elected to the position in spite of the opposition of Deve Gowda. When Hegde was expelled from the party, Patel was among the first to criticise the move.
4. For electoral analysis purposes Karnataka is divided into four regions: (a) Old Mysore region (formerly part of the princely state of Mysore); (b) Hyderabad-Karnataka region (formerly part of the territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad); (c) Bombay-Karnataka region (formerly part of the Bombay presidency); and (d) Coastal Karnataka.

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