

Rise of the BJP as a Ruling Party in Karnataka

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Abstract

The growth of BJP as a major political force in Karnataka starts from 1983 election, when the party came up with a remarkable performance with third highest number of seats in the Assembly. The traditional bipolarity of power involving Congress and Janata Party/ Dal faced greatest blow and paved way for BJP's entry exiting Janata Party/Dal as the major opponent of Congress. The complex social matrix in Karnataka favoured BJP and elevated its position as the ruling party in 2008. The paper tries to find out the range of contemporary political developments in Karnataka which placed BJP back to square one.

Keywords: bipolarity, election, voting behaviour, delimitation, coalition

The State of Karnataka has been of special significance for the BJP as it was one of the only state south of the Vindhyas where it saw a real chance of being able to bid for power. Ever since its formation in 1980, the BJP has focused attention on Karnataka. In its bid to emerge as a principal player in state politics, the party had to strategize to challenge the domination of the two other major parties in the state – Congress and the Janata Party/Dal.

In the very first elections it contested in the state in 1983, the party came up with a remarkable performance by emerging as a party with the third highest number of seats in an Assembly where

no party secure a majority. This election not only marked the end of one party domination it also helped the BJP to test the electoral waters. In what was seen a contest between the Congress and the Janata Party, the BJP made impressive gains (Raju et.al, 1983). However, in the subsequent years of the decade, the BJP was overshadowed by the Janata Party and the Congress. In successive state assembly and Lok Sabha elections, the BJP was not able to assert its electoral presence. The 1991 Lok Sabha election saw the BJP opening its account in Karnataka. In the Assembly elections that followed three years later, the BJP emerged as the principal opposition in the state legislature. Its support base across the state was still limited and it was a beneficiary of the earlier split in the Congress party (Shastri, 1995). The year 1998 saw the BJP in alliance with the Lok Shakti winning a majority of the seats in Karnataka Lok Sabha poll. It was not able to repeat the performance in 1999 when a Lok Sabha election was held concurrently with the Assembly poll. It however, retained its position as the principal opposition in the state assembly. The 2004 elections were of tremendous political significance for the BJP. They not only won a majority of the seats from the state in the Lok Sabha but also emerged as the single largest party in the Assembly. In the 2008 Assembly elections, the BJP fell two short of a majority and formed the government with the support of the independents. This paper focuses on the 2004 and 2008 elections as these were instrumental in allowing it to emerge as a ruling party in the state.

Understanding the 2004 Verdict

The 2004 Assembly elections saw the BJP emerging as the single largest party in the house. This was the closest; the party had come to making a bid for power in the state. The backdrop to this election is outlined to contextualize the 2004 developments and the subsequent political events. 2004 saw a simultaneous Lok Sabha and State Assembly polls. While the Lok Sabha elections were called as per schedule, the ruling party in the state (Congress) favoured an early poll. It was a gamble by the then Chief Minister S.M. Krishna

which many within the party strongly opposed (Shastri and Ramaswamy 2004). S.M. Krishna was to concede after the results that the strategy backfired (Deccan Herald, 2 May 2004). The BJP strategy in this poll was clear. It was clearly focusing on the Lok Sabha poll. The BJP led NDA was completing one full term and was hoping to win back the support of the electorate for a second term. A stable government under an able leader was their slogan and the party was keen to enhance its strength within the alliance. For this it was keen to do well in Karnataka where it had the potential but had performed badly in 1999. Their principal agenda in Karnataka appeared to be to send as big a contingent to the Lok Sabha from the state as possible in order to boost the BJP strength within the NDA. The fact that there was also a state election seemed to be incidental. The state assembly election campaign was merely a subsidiary of the Lok Sabha election campaign. Commenting on the importance of this election Shastri and Ramaswamy elaborate:

For the BJP, Karnataka ... 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 the seats in the kitty of the National Democratic alliance (NDA) by its contribution from Karnataka. Coming to power in the state would have come as a welcome bonus (Shastri and Ramaswamy 2009: 79).

The 2004 Verdict and its Political Implications

The BJP won 18 of the 28 seats to the Lok Sabha from the state (See Table 1). This was an important victory as it showed that the 1998 victory (BJP-Lok Shakti alliance winning a majority of Lok Sabha seats) was not a flash in the pan. However, in the Assembly polls which were held simultaneously, the BJP was not able to match its Lok Sabha performance and was only able to emerge as the single largest party with 79 of the 22 seats (35 per cent as compared

to nearly two thirds of the Lok Sabha seats). The percentage of seats that the Congress won in the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections from the state was more or less the same. There is more or less a similar difference between the percentage of seats that the BJP and Janata Dal (S) won in the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in the state. As Shastri and Ramaswamy assert, 'what the BJP lost at the Assembly level, the Janata Dal (S) gained' (Shastri and Ramaswamy 2009:80).

Table 1
Results of the 2004 Assembly Elections and Lok Sabha Elections from the State

Lok Sabha (28 seats)				State Assembly Elections (224 seats)				
	BJP	Congress	Janata Dal (S)	BJP	Congress	Janata Dal (S)	Janata Dal (U)	Others
Seats won	18	8	2	79	65	58	5	17

Source: Election Commission of India, website: www.eci.nic.in

This is the first time Karnataka had witnessed a split verdict in a simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly polls. Shastri and Ramaswamy refer to it as 'ticket splitting' (Shastri and Ramaswamy, 2009:81). Basing their argument on National Election Study 2004 data, they maintain that:

Survey data reveals that 84 percent of those who voted for the Congress in the assembly polls voted for the Congress in the Lok Sabha elections too. In the case of the BJP, this percentage dropped to around 66 percent. This implies that 34 percent of those who voted for the BJP in the Lok Sabha polls voted for other parties' candidates in the Assembly polls. The shift was in more or less equal proportion

to the Congress, Janata Dal (S) and independents... 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 a Lok Sabha contingent from the state with nearly two-thirds majority for the BJP, on the other (Shastri and Ramaswamy, 2009: 82).

The above data makes clear that in 2004, the electorate in the state seemed, on the one hand, clear about wanting to give another chance to the NDA at the Centre by voting a large contingent of BJP Lok Sabha members, though they were still not ready to vote the BJP to power in the state. National Election Study data reveals that the assessment of the people in the state about the Vajpayee led NDA government was very positive. Two thirds of the respondents were satisfied/very satisfied with the performance of the NDA government. On the other hand, more than two-thirds of the respondents were dissatisfied/highly dissatisfied with the Krishna led Congress government in the state. On bread and butter issues, of drinking water and power supply, a high percentage of respondents said that the services has deteriorated during the past five years under Congress government in the state. Shastri and Ramaswamy argue that the rejection of the Congress by the voters did not translate itself into a clear vote in favour of either the BJP or the Janata Dal (S). They succinctly argue that, 'neither the BJP nor the Janata Dal (S) was able to present itself as a viable alternative to the Congress across the state' (Shastri and Ramaswamy, 2009: 85).

Three factors could explain the inability of the BJP to ensure that voters who voted for its candidates in the Lok Sabha polls, did not support their candidates a few minutes later in the Assembly polls. First, the failure of the BJP to carry on a sustained campaign that focused on the Assembly elections. Secondly, it did not pay sufficient care to the nomination of winnable candidates. 18 of the 37 sitting BJP MLAs who were renominated were defeated (Shastri and Ramaswamy:86). Finally, the alliance with the Janata Dal (U)

did not seem to benefit the BJP. The alliance partner won only 5 of the 25 assembly seats allotted to it and could not contribute to improving the performance of the alliance.

The BJP's inability to secure a majority in the Assembly elections is also linked to the fact that it was able to do well in only two regions of the state – Madras Presidency and Bombay-Karnatak regions. In Old Mysore and Hyderabad-Karnataka regions its performance was not what would be expected of a potential ruling party. This is also linked to the fact that BJP was unable to expand its social base to a significant extent among the dominant Vokkaliga community and the non-dominant OBCs.

Political Developments following the 2004 Elections

Once the 2004 election results trickled in, there was little joy in the BJP on having emerged as the single largest party in the Assembly as the NDA which it led has lost the elections at the national level. Given the fluid nature of the political situation in the state and the setback nationally, it preferred to make no effort to form the government. After days of negotiations the Congress and the Janata Dal(S) stitched together a coalition and formed the government. Even though it emerged as the single largest party, the BJP has to remain content sitting in the Assembly as the main opposition. The Congress-Janata Dal (S) coalition seemed to be doomed to failure from the moment of its inauguration. The only glue that held it together was the desire to keep the BJP out of power.

The state level political leadership of the BJP was waiting for the moment when there would develop serious cracks in the Congress-Janata Dal (S) coalition and they could make a bid for power. They had to wait just 20 months for such a political development to occur. A disgruntled segment within the Janata Dal (S) which did not enjoy power as part of the coalition led by H.D. Kumaaraswamy (younger son of Janata Dal supremo H.D. Deve

Gowda) engineered a rebellion in the party and entered into discussions with the leader of the BJP in the assembly, B .S. Yedyurappa to form a coalition. Many within the BJP did not favour joining hands with the Janata Dal (S). While the central leadership of the party counseled patience the state leadership was keen to strike a deal with the Janata Dal (S) faction (Shastri, 2011: 141).

In its desperation to come to power, the BJP made several short term compromises. First, it conceded the position of the Chief Minister to the junior partner, the Janata Dal (S) and remained content with the Deputy Chief Ministers position. Secondly, no written agreement was endorsed by both parties on the transfer of Chief Ministership to the BJP after 20 months. Thirdly, no common agenda was prepared by the new coalition partners. The new Janata Dal(S)-BJP government was assumed office in great haste with Kumaaraswamy as the Chief Minister and Yedyurappa as his Deputy. There was little that held the coalition together. The Janata Dal(S) did not mince words in criticizing its coalition partner if the occasion so arose. Nothing much was expected from the alliance in view of the political expediency which dictated its creation.

It may be useful to record here that within a few months of the installation of the Janata Dal (S)-BJP coalition government, the State Of Nation Survey (SONS) conducted by Lokniti-CSDS, revealed that the Janata Dal(S) Chief Minister was appreciated by the voters in the state for developing a distinct style of functioning which was both informal and had a tinge of genuineness (Shastri, 2011). One fourth of the respondents were fully satisfied with the performance of the government and nearly half the respondents were fully satisfied with its functioning.

As the end of the 20 months approached and the transfer of Chief Ministership was raised by the BJP, the Janata Dal(S) clearly indicated that it has second thoughts. At the end of the 20 month period, when the Janata Dal(S) refused to hand over Chief

Ministership, the BJP withdrew from the coalition resulting in the resignation of the government and the declaration of Presidents Rule. Many within the BJP wondered whether the coalition experiment was worth its while. The state level leadership of the party was convinced that it would benefit from the sympathy factor at having been denied their turn to lead the government. Realizing the backlash it may suffer at having gone back on its promise to hand over power, the Janata Dal (S) decided to support the BJP in its bid to form a government. President's rule was lifted and Yedyurappa became Chief Minister. The Janata Dal (S) promised to join the government after it won the vote of confidence. The first BJP government in South India thus assumed office. As the day of the confidence vote approached, the Janata Dal (S) backtracked and the twenty day old BJP government resigned without proving its majority. Presidents Rule was once again imposed in the state.

After two short coalition governments and a twenty day BJP government which was unable to prove its majority, the prospect of a mid term poll loomed large. The BJP was keen on an immediate election so that it could cash in on and sympathy factor in its favour. The party was very vocal in its criticism of the Janata Dal (S) for having gone back on its promise and denied it the opportunity to lead a coalition government in the state. The Congress and the Janata Dal(S) saw no urgency in holding a mid term election. They wanted sufficient time to lapse before a mid term election was called.

The 2008 Assembly Elections

The state finally went to the poll in 2008. The BJP realised that the moment had arrived to make a concerted effort to make a real bid for power. They hoped that the 'sympathy factor' of having been denied their legitimate chance to lead a government in spite of being the single largest party may work in the favour. The Congress on the other hand, tried to showcase the fact that four years in the state had witnessed political instability in the light of coalitions formed on the basis of political expediency. They made an appeal for a clear

mandate in their favour to ensure a stable government and saw themselves as the clear and natural choice. They also emphasised the fact that they were in power at the Centre and the same party in power at both levels would work to the advantage of the common people. The Janata Dal (S) was realistic in its political assessment. They realized that the positive image that their former Chief Minister Kumaaraswamy enjoyed had got a little dented because of not honouring the agreement with the BJP on the hand over of power. While in the public domain, they claimed that they wished to bid for power independently, in private they hoped for an Assembly with no party having a clear majority, thus allowing them to position themselves as the king makers.

If the electoral strategies adopted by the different parties are analysed, one notices that the BJP had a head start for several reasons. It decided on its candidates relatively early and was the first among the major three political parties to announce its candidate list. In spite of several serious internal differences, the state-level BJP leadership decided to put up a united front and projected Yedyurappa as its candidate for the chief minister. While the BJP played up the 'betrayal' card, it soon realized its limitations because its principal adversary was the Congress, not the Janata Dal (S) which had betrayed it. It decided to focus on the fact that unlike the Congress, it had a clear candidate for Chief Ministership. It also attempted to project some of the achievements of its ministers in the Janata Dal (S)-BJP government and took credit for much of the goodwill that the government enjoyed. It would also be important to record that the BJP has to reevaluate its strategy of ticket distribution in order to make a bid for power. Conscious of the fact that it needed to expand its electoral support base, the party had gone beyond its traditional support base and had taken in members who did not owe allegiance to its frontal organizations like the RSS. It admitted many from the Congress and Janata Dal(S) to its fold. Many involved with important business and other commercial interests (mining lobbies, real estate lobby, education lobby, liquor lobby) were admitted to the

party (Shastri 2011a). Many of these new recruits were also given tickets to contest the elections. Though this was not to the liking of the party loyalists, it was accepted as an inevitable compromise while making a bid to emerge as the ruling party.

The Congress on the other hand, was handicapped by the lack of a focused strategy, clear direction and effective leadership. It had too many aspirants for Chief Ministership even before being close to power. Each leader appeared to be pulling in a different direction, concentrating on his/her limited area of influence. The list of veteran leaders who were in the poll fray was quite formidable.

In the case of the Janata Dal (S), its campaign revolved around its 'first family' - the Deve Gowda and his sons. By the time the election came around, all those who were even mildly opposed the domination of the family had been eased out of the party. The party made an attempt to highlight the contributions of the Janata Dal (S) -BJP government under its Chief Minister Kumaaraswamy. It also tried to rationalize its going on the promise of hand over of power to the BJP by saying that it saved the state from being placed in the hands of anti-secular and communal forces. The Janata Dal (S) also sought to take the credit for the good work done by its Ministers in the Congress led coalition government of which it was a part.

Over having been in the electoral fray in the state for a quarter of a century (it contested the first poll in the state in 1983), the BJP was finally able to come to power after the elections in 2008. It won, 110 of the 224 seats, falling short of a majority by two seats. Congress candidates were successful in 80 seats and the Janata Dal (S) managed to win 28 seats. The remaining seats were won by independents. The BJP under the leadership of B.S. Yedyurappa formed the government with the support of independents (See Table:2).

Table 2
Seats won by different Political Parties and Independents in
the 2008 Assembly Elections in Karnataka
(Total Seats 224)

	BJP	Congress	Janata Dal (S)	Independents
Seats won	110	80	28	6

Source: Election Commission of India, website : www.eci.nic.in

Several factors contributed to this final success of the BJP in Karnataka. The sympathy factor clearly worked in the BJP's favour and the voters felt that the party should be given a chance to come to power. The party went to the polls as a unified force, setting aside its internal differences. The disarray and lack of unity in the ranks of its principal opponents (Congress) also worked to the advantage of BJP. The party was the only one which projected a Chief Minister from the influential Lingayat community. This helped it to further consolidate the votes of the community in its favour. It was also able to retain its support among the Upper Castes and enhance its support among the other dominant caste the Vokkaligas and among the non dominant Other Backward Castes (OBCs). The BJP had been doing well in the Bombay Karnataka region and the Coastal part of the state. It maintained its good performance there and improved its performance in the crucial Old Mysore region. This was the first election after the delimitation exercise. Delimitation had redrawn the borders of constituencies and increased the number of urban seats. This seems to have worked to the advantage of the BJP. Finally, the advantage of the lead player in the first past the post system helped the BJP.

Survey data (Lokniti/CSDS Data) from Karnataka Post Poll Study 2008, provides some indication of what contributed to the BJP victory. Two questions are analyzed here. When asked who their

choice of Chief Minister was, close to one third of the respondents mentioned the name of the BJP candidate for Chief Minister, B S Yedyurappa. A distant second was the Janata Dal (S) leader and former Chief Minister Kumaaraswamy. Another fifteen percent mentioned S.M.Krishna who was not even contesting the elections. Among the Congress leaders who were contesting the elections, no one had secured double digit support (See Table 3).

Table 3
Choice of Chief Minister-Karnataka Post Poll Study 2009
(all figures in percentages)

Name	Support
Yedyurappa	33
Kumaaraswamy	19
S.M.Krishna	12
Mallikarjun Kharge	9
Dharam Singh	8
Siddaramiah	4
Others	12

Source : Lokniti/CSDS Data 2009

Respondents were also asked to rate the state governments that they had since 1999. They were asked to rate all the four governments : the Yedyurappa led BJP government, the Kumaraswamy led Janata Dal (S)- BJP government, the Dharam Singh led Congress-Janata Dal (S) government and the S.M. Krishna led Congress government. While three of every ten respondents opted for the Kumaaraswamy government close to two of every ten supported the short lived BJP government (See Table:4). This was

closely followed by the Krishna government and the Dharam Singh government. The governments, in which the Congress party was involved, did not figure high in the favoured lists of governments. The 20 day BJP government led by Yedyurappa came in second in spite of not having the time to settle down. The BJP seems to have benefitted from the good rating received by the Janata Dal (S)-BJP coalition government.

Table 4
Most favoured state government-Karnataka Post Poll Study 2009
(all figures in percentages)

Name	Support
Kumaaraswamy led Janata Dal (S)-BJP government	31
Yedyurappa led BJP government	19
S.M.Krishna led Congress government	18
Dharam Singh led Congress- Janata Dal (S) government	15

Source : Lokniti/CSDS Data 2009

The 2008 Assembly elections once again established the BJP as one of the key players in the politics of the state. Most seats witnessed a straight fight between the BJP and the Congress and the Janata Dal was clearly pushed to the third position. While the BJP won in 110 constituencies, its candidates came in second in 58. Its nominees stood first or second in as many as 168 constituencies (75%). Congress nominees won 80 seats and came in second in as many as 116 seats. The party thus registered its presence in 196 seats, more than 85% of the total seats. The Janata Dal (S) won 28 seats and its candidates came in second in 39. This means that the party finished first or second in less than 30% of the seats. Its

candidates were pushed to the third position (with the BJP and the Congress occupying the first two positions in most cases) in as many as 112 seats (50%).

The BJP victory was essentially a victory in select regions. They came up with a spectacular performance in Bombay Karnatak and Coastal regions (largely the Madras Presidency region) and pockets of the Old Mysore region.

In the Bombay-Karnatak region, where the Lingayat community has a significant presence, the party recorded its best performance, winning nearly three-fourths of the seats (36 of 50). In coastal Karnataka, the BJP faced a stiff competition from the Congress and it was a straight fight between the two parties in most constituencies. It was also able to do reasonably well in this region. If the BJP was not able to cross the half-way mark, it has a lot to do with its performance in parts of the Old Mysore region and Hyderabad Karnatak region. Southern Karnataka, the core of the old Mysore region, accounts for more than 20% of the seats in the state. In this election, the Congress bagged a majority of the seats in the region while the Janata Dal (S) won 30% (14 of 51). The BJP managed to win only seven seats. In the Hyderabad Karnatak region it was able to win only 11 of the 31 seats, conceding 14 to the Congress and 5 to the Janata Dal (S). What allowed the BJP to inch towards the majority was its reasonably good performance in the Central Karnataka and Bangalore regions of Old Mysore. It won 25 of the 35 seats in Central Karnataka and 19 of the 36 seats in the Bangalore region (urban and rural) (Shastri and Padmavathi, 2009).

The new delimitation of constituencies also seems to have worked to the BJP's advantage. The increased number of urban constituencies and the better performance of the BJP in urban areas boosted its chances. There are 26 constituencies in Bangalore city and 30 urban constituencies (district capitals only) in the rest of the state. The BJP won 15 of the 26 seats in Bangalore city, with the Congress bagging ten and the Janata Dal (S) one. In the 30 other

urban constituencies, the BJP won in 19, the Congress in 6, the Janata Dal (S) in 4 and an independent in one. Thus overall, the BJP won 34 of the 56 seats in urban areas, the Congress won 16 and the Janata Dal (S) won 5.

The caste factor too appeared to tilt the scales in favour of the BJP. The BJP was able to further expand its already strong base in the Lingayat community. It was the only party which offered a Chief Ministerial candidate from this community. In this election, the party also made a concerted effort to wean away the Vokkaliga vote from the Janata Dal (S) and the Congress. The party was able to ensure a substantial increase in its share of the Vokkaliga vote though there continued to be a three way split (between Janata Dal (S), Congress and BJP) of the community vote. The party was able to retain its base among the Upper Castes and Scheduled Castes and also garner support among the non Dominant Other Backward Communities and Scheduled Tribes. This complex social matrix seemed to work in favour of the BJP and helped it position itself as the ruling party in the state.

If the educational and economic profile of the respondents is taken into account, one sees a clear pattern in the preference for the BJP and Congress which got further endorsed in the 2008 elections. In the case of the BJP its votes share increases among the more educated and declines as one goes to those with less or limited access to education. In the case of the Congress, the support for the party declined with an improvement in the level of education. The same holds good for economic status. The more affluent the respondent the more likely they are to vote for the BJP and the poorer the respondent, the more likely his or her vote went to the Congress.

The leadership factor and unity within the party also greatly favoured the BJP. They were able to project their Chief Minister candidate and demonstrate a well oiled campaign with all leaders

chipping in. Its principal opponent, the Congress preferred the path of collective leadership and spoke in several voices. This adversely affected their campaign.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to outline the rise of the BJP to power by using the window provided by the 2004 and 2008 elections. These two elections clearly established the BJP as a key player in Karnataka politics. Shastri has argued that these elections see a transition from a brief phase of multi-polarity to bi-polarity (Shastri and Padmavathi, 2009; Shastri, 2011a). The 1980s and early 1990s saw bipolarity in the state politics involving the Congress and the Janata Party/Dal. This was followed by a temporary phase of multi-polarity. Shastri asserts that the 2004 and 2008 elections have paved the way for a new bi-polarity involving the Congress and the BJP as the principal opponents (Shastri, 2011a). On the other hand, Yadav and Palshikar in their analysis of state politics in India, place Karnataka in the category of stable multi-party convergence (Yadav and Palshikar, 2009a; 2009b). They assert that the state is witness to a stable multi-party competition. The 2008 elections in Karnataka seem to point to a new bi polarity emerging especially if one were to look at constituency level data where the principal contests is invariably between two principal parties. The 2008 poll, clearly signaled the arrival of the BJP as one of the key players in the politics of the State.

Postscript

By the time the journal issue is released, a range of political developments have taken place in Karnataka. The BJP government completed its five year term and the state saw General Elections in May 2013. The ruling BJP was squarely defeated and the Congress

party was returned to power. The Pre Poll Survey done by CSDS-Lokniti clearly indicates that the Congress won on a clear negative vote against the corruption, infighting and mal-administration of the BJP government in the state (Shastri 2013). During its five years in power, the party changed the Chief Minister thrice preventing a much needed stability in the administration. The party witnessed intense infighting with their leader and Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa being forced to resign by the central leadership of the party on account of his indictment by the Lok Ayukta. Over time Yeddyurappa broke away from the party and formed a regional party - Karnataka Janata Party. During its five years in power, the BJP frittered away an opportunity to prove that it was different. The BJP has now been relegated to the third position in the Assembly with the Janata Dal (S) emerging as the official opposition. The nature and structure of the party competition in the state remains fluid and has not been categorically defined by the 2013 verdict.

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