

Verdict of the Karnataka Electorate : An Assessment

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The verdict of the Karnataka voters in the 1998 Lok Sabha elections has been the focus of intense debate during the past few weeks. Even during the run up to the elections, Karnataka attracted nationwide attention in view of the realignment of political forces in the State and its likely impact both on national and State politics. The results in Karnataka have emphatically endorsed the trend of tri-polar competition, which was apparent even in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. The twilight of the Congress hegemony was witnessed (in Karnataka) in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, with the ruling Janata Dal winning 16 seats and the BJP candidates emerging victorious in six constituencies. The Congress was relegated to the third position winning only five seats. In 1998, the Janata Dal has been pushed to the third position winning only three seats, with the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance securing 16 seats and the Congress having increased its tally to nine seats.

It would be relevant to recall at this stage the major political developments in Karnataka subsequent to the 1996 Lok Sabha poll as they appear to have had a major impact on the nature of electoral preferences expressed in 1998. The Janata Dal's creditable performance in 1996 came as a surprise to many political observers (including the Janata Dal leaders) and was a major factor in Deve Gowda assuming the office of the Prime Minister. However, the suspension of Ramakrishna Hegde from the Janata Dal, within days of the Deve Gowda Government winning the confidence motion in the Lok Sabha, shattered the unity which had been so tenuously maintained by the party leadership in the State ever since 1993. The promise of unity held out by the leadership troika (Hegde, Bommai and Deve Gowda) had played a significant role in ensuring the party's victory both in the 1994 Assembly and the 1996 Lok Sabha elections.

Further, the performance of the Janata Dal Government in the State under the leadership of J.H.

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Patel left much to be desired and did not appear to inspire confidence among the Janata Dal workers. It has also been argued that the manner in which the State Government functioned and the forces that appeared to call the shots were clearly indicative of the influence and power wielded by the dominant castes. Even among these castes, many Lingayats—especially in Northern Karnataka—were convinced that the Vokkaligas alone were manipulating and managing power. This development resulted in the gradual alienation of the other backward communities (OBCs), minorities and Dalits. The polarisation on caste lines within the ruling Janata Dal came to the fore when Laloo Prasad Yadav rebelled against the national leadership of the party (which included Deve Gowda), with the OBC leaders in the party at the State level, using the occasion to express their displeasure at the manner in which the Vokkaligas appeared to control and manipulate the government machinery in the State. Several OBC leaders in the State Janata Dal, who in the past had been staunch supporters of Deve Gowda, now openly expressed their dissent at the manner in which his (Deve Gowda's) confidants were attempting to use the State machinery for furthering their own caste/personal interests. The above factor had a crucial impact on the 1998 poll. The clear erosion of the support for the ruling Janata Dal was evident in the results of the bye-elections to the State Assembly held between 1996 and 1998.

The formation of the Nava Nirmana Vedike and later the Lok Shakti by Ramakrishna Hegde triggered off further realignment of political forces. While on the one hand it permitted the supporters of Hegde to unite under his leadership, it also provided an alternative to those in the Janata Dal who were unhappy with/against controlling the party in the State.

After the 1996 Lok Sabha poll, the Congress party did attempt to rethink its strategy in view of its dismal performance, especially in terms of the seats the party won in the State. It needs to be stressed that though the Congress was relegated to the third position in the Lok Sabha poll in the State, in terms

of votes it came second with a little over 30 per cent of the votes and way ahead of the BJP which secured just 25 per cent of the votes (Table 1). Though the Congress candidates emerged victorious in only five constituencies, its candidates came second in as many as 15 other constituencies, signifying that the party was a principal contestant in 20 of the 28 constituencies. The party made serious attempts to widen its support base among the OBCs and minorities, especially in view of the Janata Dal being perceived as a party that served the interests of the dominant castes. Leaders from among the OBC and Dalit communities were accorded prominent positions in the party, including the KPCC Presidentship and the Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leadership. With Sitaram Kesri taking over as the Congress President, the return of Bangarappa and his supporters to the party was successfully negotiated (later when Bangarappa once again left the party many of those who had aligned with him earlier preferred to remain in the Congress this time around). However, the party was unable to launch a serious and sustained campaign against the lacklustre performance of the Janata Dal Government in the State. The party also found it difficult to effectively and convincingly explain its outside support to the United Front Government at the Centre. Above all, the party was plagued by serious infighting and absence of an effective leadership with mass appeal.

Soon after the 1996 Lok Sabha poll, the BJP attempted to consolidate on its performance in the elections. The party realised that though it may have emerged second in the State, in terms of vote share the party was five percentage points behind the Congress. Of crucial significance was the fact that though the party had won six seats in the State, its nominees had emerged in the second position in only six other constituencies. The party was thus a principal contestant in only 12 of the 28 constituencies in the State. When the 13-day Vajpayee Government was forced to resign on failing to muster the necessary support in the Lok Sabha, the BJP in the State launched a widespread campaign to generate a 'sympathy wave' in their favour. The post-poll survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) soon after the installation of the Deve Gowda Government in 1996, showed that a little over 12 per cent of the respondents favoured Vajpayee as the Prime Minister. In the pre-poll survey held at the time of the announcement of elections only a little over four per cent of the respondents favoured him as the Prime Minister, implying an eight percentage point increase in support. The party

found itself in an advantageous position as it could highlight both the failures of the United Front Government at the Centre as well as the poor performance of the Janata Dal Government in the State and at the same time, even criticise the Congress party for supporting the UF at the Centre. The party made serious efforts to win the support of sections of the powerful Lingayat community in Northern Karnataka, who had moved away from the Janata Dal. It is in this context that the party's alliance with the Lok Shakti assumes significance. The BJP-Lok Shakti alliance was mutually complimentary and the calculation of the BJP was that by aligning with the Lok Shakti, it would be possible for the party to widen its support base. This strategy paid the party rich dividends.

II

THE importance that the Karnataka voters attached to the 1998 poll can be seen from the fact that all the 28 constituencies witnessed an increase in the voter turnout.

Electoral and political analysts have emphasised the importance of the anti-incumbency factor in the just concluded elections. It is beyond doubt that the 'incumbency syndrome' did contribute to the poor performance of the ruling party in the Lok Sabha elections in the State. In 14 of the 18 States which have more than two Lok Sabha seats, the ruling party in the State secured less than half the Lok Sabha seats (Punjab, West Bengal, J&K and Uttar Pradesh are the only exceptions—it is also argued that in UP there may have been a doubt in the minds of the voter as to which was the ruling party). However, the impact of the incumbency syndrome in Karnataka is distinct in significant ways. In most States, the principal Opposition party was the beneficiary of the anti-incumbency mood, be it the Congress/Congress-led alliance in Maharashtra and Rajasthan or the BJP/BJP and its allies in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Orissa. Even if it were to be conceded that the incumbency factor worked against the Janata Dal in Karnataka, the voters were required to make a conscious choice of favouring either the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance or the Congress. Terming the Karnataka verdict as an anti-incumbency vote would only be partially true, as the results also reflected a positive preference expressed in favour the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance.

The relegation of the Janata Dal to the third position in Karnataka is likely to have a serious impact on the State politics in the long run. The vote share of the party has fallen by nearly 13 per cent

(Table 1). In 25 of the 28 constituencies there was a swing of votes against the party and in most cases the decline was by more than 10 percentage points (Table 3). The party nominees were in the first or second position in only six of the 28 constituencies (Table 2), implying that the party was a principal contestant in less than one-fourth of the seats in the State. Ten of its candidates lost their security deposits; of those two were sitting MPs and one was a State Minister. Nine of the 10 sitting MPs of the party who sought re-election on the party ticket were defeated. All the four State Ministers who contested the elections, were defeated.

TABLE 1
Lok Sabha Elections from Karnataka 1998 :
Votes polled by Major Political Parties

	Congress	Janata Dal	BJP	Lok Shakti	BJP+ Lok Shakti
Votes Polled in 1998	35.97	21.52	26.93	11.49	38.42
Votes Polled in 1996	30.29	34.29	24.85	—	
Increase/Decrease	+5.68	-12.77	+2.08		

Even though the Congress has improved on its previous performance with its vote share having registered an increase of over five per cent, it was unable to repeat its pre-1996 performance of winning a majority of the seats in the State. Its nominees finished first or second in all constituencies save one, implying that it was the principal contestant in 27 of the 28 constituencies (Table 2). None of its candidates forfeited his/her deposit. As mentioned earlier, infighting within the party appears to have been principally responsible for the defeat of the party candidates in several constituencies. Further, the party preferred to re-nominate many of those defeated in 1996. Six of those defeated in 1996 and renominated in 1998 had to once again taste defeat, some losing by wide margins. Even though Mrs Sonia Gandhi campaigned extensively for the party in the State, it appeared to have had a limited impact as the preliminary groundwork had not been effectively done by the local Congress leaders.

The BJP/Lok Shakti alliance appears to have benefited the BJP more than the Lok Shakti. Of the 13 seats the BJP won (it contested 18), five were seats it retained from the previous elections and another five seats were those where it had come second in 1996—having lost by narrow margins. Only three seats were those where it had come third in the

previous elections (Kanakapura, Chikamagalur, Mysore). All these three seats are in the Old Mysore region, where the influence of the Lok Shakti is largely limited. The BJP was a principal contestant—its nominees coming first or second—in 15 of the 18 constituencies in which it fielded its candidates. Only one of its candidates lost his deposit.

TABLE 2
Lok Sabha Elections from Karnataka 1998 :
Principal Contestants

Principal Contestants First and Second Position	No. of Constituencies
BJP/Congress	12
BJP/Janata Dal	1
Lok Shakti/Congress	3
Congress/BJP	2
Congress/Lok Shakti	5
Congress/Janata Dal	2
Janata Dal/Congress	3

Attention also needs to be focussed on the Lok Shakti's performance in the State. The party was able to win only three of the 10 seats it contested, though its candidates came second in five constituencies, making it a principal contestant in eight of the 10 constituencies. Its capacity to ensure the switch of Janata Dal votes to the Lok Shakti remains untested as six of the seven constituencies where its candidates lost, were earlier held by the Janata Dal and were now wrested by the Congress. Only one of the Lok Shakti candidates lost her deposit.

TABLE 3
Lok Sabha Elections from Karnataka 1998 :
Swing of Votes—1996 to 1998 Elections

	Congress	Janata Dal	BJP
More than -20		7	
-10 to -20	1	14	
-5 to -10	1	3	
-3 to -5	4		
0 to -3	1	1	1
	7	25	1
0 to 3	2		1
3 to 5	1		3
5 to 10	12	1	1
10 to 20	4	2	10
More than 20	2		2
	21	3	17

For purposes of analysis, Karnataka can be divided into four regions: Old Mysore region, Bombay Karnatak region, Hyderabad Karnatak region and Coastal Karnataka. The BJP did exceptionally well in Coastal Karnataka (where it won all the three seats)

and in Bombay Karnatak (where in alliance with the Lok Shakti it won all but one of the seats). In Old Mysore it was in a position to win only six of the 14 seats (Table 4). All the Lok Shakti victories were in the Bombay Karnatak region and the party drew a blank in the Old Mysore and Hyderabad Karnatak regions, where it had fielded candidates. Its poor performance in the Hyderabad Karnatak region needs to be taken note of as it had fielded candidates in three of the five constituencies in this region claiming them to be its strongholds. All the three Janata Dal victories were in the Old Mysore region. While five of the Congress victories were in the Old Mysore region, the party won three seats in the Hyderabad Karnatak region and one seat in the Bombay Karnatak region (Table 4).

TABLE 4
Lok Sabha Elections from Karnataka 1998 :
Region-wise Performance

Region	Seats Won			
	Congress	Janata Dal	BJP	Lok Shakti
Old Mysore (14)	5	3	6	
Hyderabad Karnatak (5)	3	—	2	
Bombay Karnatak (6)	1	—	2	3
Coastal Karnatak	—	—	3	

The 1998 Lok Sabha elections from Karnataka saw a majority of the candidates winning by wide margins. Twentyfour of the 28 victories were by margins of more than five per cent of the valid votes polled (Table 5). All the three major parties/alliances' victories, in most cases, were by decisive margins.

TABLE 5
Lok Sabha Elections from Karnataka 1998 :
Margin of Victories
(Calculated as percentage of valid votes polled)

	Congress	Janata Dal	BJP	Lok Shakti
0 to 1	—	—	1	—
1 to 3	1	—	1	—
3 to 5	—	1	—	—
5 to 10	4	1	3	—
10 to 20	4	—	6	3
More than 20	—	1	1	—

When the social background of the elected MPs is examined, a significant number (15 of the 28) hail from the dominant caste—10 Lingayats and five Vokkaligas. In the Bombay Karnatak region, save for the Reserved seat, in all the other constituencies, Lingayats have been elected. A significant number of

the BJP/Lok Shakti candidates in the Bombay Karnatak and Hyderabad Karnatak regions hailed from the Lingayat community and as the alliance did well in these regions, six of the 13 BJP MPs and two of the three Lok Shakti MPs were from this community. The number of MPs from the non-dominant backward communities has registered a sharp decline. Only five of the Karnataka Lok Sabha MPs belong to the OBCs and of them four were elected on the Congress ticket (Table 6).

TABLE 6
Lok Sabha Elections from Karnataka 1998 :
Social Background of Karnataka MPs

Caste	Congress	Janata Dal	BJP	Lok Shakti	Total
Lingayats	2	—	6	2	10
Vokkaligas	1	2	2	—	5
Brahmins	—	—	2	—	2
Jains	—	—	1	—	1
Kurubas	1	—	1	—	2
Idigas	1	—	—	—	1
Other					
OBCs	2	—	—	—	2
Muslims	1	—	—	—	1
Dalits	1	1	1	1	4

III

It is beyond a shadow of doubt that the electoral verdict in Karnataka would have a long-term impact on the State politics.

In the past, whenever the ruling party in the State fared badly in the Lok Sabha elections, political compulsions either necessitated the dissolution of the Assembly and the holding of fresh elections or resulted in mass defections to the party that emerged victorious in the Lok Sabha poll and the formation of an alternative government. In 1971, when Chief Minister Veerendra Patil's Congress-O was routed in the poll, he submitted his resignation and though the Congress-I did make efforts to cobble together a majority it did not succeed, resulting in the declaration of President's Rule and fresh elections. In the 1980 Lok Sabha poll, when the Congress-U, led by Chief Minister Devraj Urs, was unable to win a single seat in the State, there was an exodus from the Congress-U to the Congress-I resulting in Gundu Rao becoming the Chief Minister. In the 1984 Lok Sabha poll, when the Janata Party led by Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde fared badly, the Chief Minister submitted his resignation, and fresh elections were held subsequent to the dissolution of the Assembly.

This time around, it was anticipated that in the

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event of the Janata Dal facing a rout in the Lok-Sabha poll in the State, either the MLAs of the party would join the Lok Shakti in large numbers, resulting in the formation of an alternative government or the Assembly would be dissolved necessitating fresh elections. However, no such development seems apparent. With Ramakrishna Hegde having moved to national politics, the Janata Dal MLAs are reluctant to join the Lok Shakti in view of their reservations with regard to who would lead a prospective Lok Shakti/BJP Government. It is in this context that the demand that Hegde return to State politics is being made. Further, the BJP is not too enthusiastic about the formation of a Lok Shakti/BJP Government with the help of Janata Dal MLAs crossing over to the Lok Shakti. Such a government would have the Lok Shakti in the driving seat with the BJP having to pay second fiddle.

Both the BJP and the Lok Shakti do not appear keen on fresh elections as this has the potential of straining the alliance between the two parties. In the event of Assembly elections, the BJP/Lok Shakti alliance would come under severe strain on the question of which party should be the senior partner. In the light of the slim majority the BJP and its allies enjoy in the Lok Sabha, the party would prefer to delay the elections in Karnataka, to avoid any complications with its allies. The Congress too does not seem to favour immediate elections in the light of its performance in the Lok Sabha poll. The party would prefer some more time to lapse in order that its Central leadership (the newly anointed High Command) assumes full control of the situation and the BJP led government in Delhi falters resulting in the possible erosion of its support. The status quo is thus likely to continue for the present.

With Assembly elections due only after 20 months, the political developments (both national and local) during the period are crucial in determining the nature and course of politics in a State which has clearly seen the emergence of a tri-polar electoral contest. ■