

“NEW FORMS OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN KARNATAKA: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS.”**DHARMANNA MADAR, DR. BASAVARAJA G**

Research Scholar, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University Tumkur.

Email- Dharmu.madar@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4309-9920>

Professor, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University Tumkur.

Email- drbasavaraja@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7433-6875>**Abstract**

This essay examines the ways in which digital platforms and social media have sparked new identity politics movements in Karnataka, India. Karnataka's identity battles, which have historically been based on caste, language, and regionalism, have developed into vibrant, tech-driven movements. Political engagement has become more democratic because to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube, which allow underrepresented groups to speak up while also dividing popular opinion. In order to demonstrate how digital tools increase both empowerment and polarization, the paper examines instances including the Hijab controversy, Lingayat religious identity movements, and Cauvery River disputes. Through disinformation, echo chambers, and algorithmic biases, social media has exacerbated divisions even as it has promoted unity among Dalits, minorities, and regional linguists. The article assesses Karnataka's policy responses to digital issues, such as content management and IT legislation. It makes the case that unmanaged platform dynamics endanger social cohesiveness even as digital activism redefines political agency. The paper highlights the complex nature of Karnataka's digital identity politics by fusing historical background with current case studies. It also advocates for inclusive governance frameworks to reduce risks and maximize chances for democratic participation.

Keywords: Digital Identity Politics, Karnataka, Social Media, Caste, Language, Regionalism, Polarization, Empowerment, Disinformation, Governance

Introduction

Caste hierarchies, language pride, and religious plurality have all influenced identity politics in Karnataka, a state that is representative of India's sociocultural variety. Identity has been at the heart of its political narrative from the Gokak fight for Kannada language supremacy to the Lingayat separatist movement. Social media's introduction in the 2010s, however, has completely changed these relationships. Communities' methods of voicing complaints, negotiating power, and challenging narratives are being transformed by the use of digital media as venues for real-time mobilization. This essay explores the evolution of identity politics in Karnataka from conventional grassroots movements to algorithm-driven campaigns where agendas are set by hashtags and viral content. For example, Muslim women used Twitter to

combat stigmatization during the Hijab issue in 2022¹, while dominant castes used YouTube as a weapon to uphold their hegemony. These instances highlight the dichotomy of digital platforms: they both give voice to underrepresented groups and facilitate majoritarian control. This interaction is made more difficult by Karnataka's distinct status as India's digital hub, where local politics are influenced by platforms modeled after Silicon Valley. This study examines how caste, linguistic, and religious identities are amplified on social media, highlighting both systemic hazards and transformative opportunities. It also examines the state's regulatory reaction, raising concerns about how well laws handle online divisiveness. The article's ultimate goal is to unravel how Karnataka's identity politics are being rebuilt in the era of memes, algorithms, and viral anger.

A Historical Overview of Identity Politics in India

Centuries of caste hierarchy, colonial legacies, and constitutional discussions following independence have all influenced identity politics in India. Brahminical hierarchies, which codified the caste system, solidified social exclusion and gave rise to anti-caste movements such as B.R. and Jyotirao Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj. Ambedkar's advocacy for Dalits. Following 1947, religious nationalism gained momentum with the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, while linguistic rearrangement of states (such as the 1956 establishment of Karnataka) established language as a political identity. Caste (Lingayat-Vokkaliga domination vs. Dalit-Bahujan assertion), language (Kannada vs. Tamil/Marathi in border regions), and religion (Hindu-Muslim tensions) have been the three main axes of identity disputes in Karnataka. Caste-based mobilization is best illustrated by the Dravidian-influenced anti-Brahmin protests and the Lingayat's 2010s quest for minority religion status. Kannada linguistic pride was emphasized by the Gokak protest in the 1980s, which opposed the imposition of Hindi. These movements have always depended on institutional lobbying, public demonstrations, and print media. However, identity-based voting blocs were broken up by the emergence of coalition politics in the 1990s, which made room for digital reconfiguration. When social media first appeared in the 2000s, it democratized narrative by allowing underrepresented groups to get beyond established gatekeepers like political parties and the media. However, it also exacerbated old grudges, frequently distilling complicated identities into divisive dichotomies. Thus, Karnataka's identity politics represent a continuity where digital instruments from the twenty-first century clash with hierarchies from the past.

The Development of Digital Platforms and Social Media

Social media has become a political battlefield due to the widespread availability of reasonably priced smartphones and internet connection, which will cover 70% of Karnataka's population by 2022. Twitter (now X) acts as a megaphone for politicians and activists, while WhatsApp, with its encrypted groups, enables hyper-local mobilization. YouTube channels like "Kannada Prabha" and "Powerful Karnataka" combine propaganda and entertainment to profit off local pride. In contrast, Facebook community sites have developed into focal points for caste-based networking, with Vokkaliga and Lingayat organizations planning political campaigns and

¹ Bouvier, G., & Way, L. C. S. (2021). Revealing the politics in “soft”, everyday uses of social media: the challenge for critical discourse studies. *Social Semiotics*, 31(3), 345–364.
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charitable events. These platforms' algorithmic design rewards sensationalism and outrage—qualities that identity-driven material frequently takes advantage of—by emphasizing interaction over accuracy². For example, TikTok videos demonizing Tamil farmers during the Cauvery water disputes received millions of views, escalating tensions in the area. Bengaluru, the IT hub of Karnataka, serves two purposes: it is home to Silicon Valley behemoths and also introduces indigenous services like ShareChat that appeal to local audiences. However, there are still disparities in digital literacy; rural users are more susceptible to manipulative content because they frequently lack the basic skills necessary to recognize false information. This disparity has been used by political parties: the Congress's social media operatives and the BJP's IT Cell use deepfakes, memes, and targeted advertisements to influence voters along caste and religious lines. In the meantime, Dalit activists circumvent the controlled mainstream media by using Instagram clips to record caste atrocities. Thus, identity has become both a weapon and a shield in parallel narratives produced by this digital ecosystem.

Social Media and the Evolution of Karnataka's Identity Politics

Greater Voice and Visibility for Underrepresented Groups

Previously marginalized by Karnataka's mainstream media, Dalit-Bahujan communities are now using Twitter and other forums to draw attention to prejudice. Following the suicide of a Dalit student, hashtags such as #JusticeForPayal (2022) went viral nationwide, requiring institutional accountability. During the hijab ban, Muslim women—who have historically been marginalized in public discourse—used Instagram to offer personal tales that challenged Islamophobic stereotypes. Similarly, YouTube documentaries are used by LGBTQ+ collectives in Karnataka, such Bengaluru Pride, to normalize queer identities in conservative communities. These groups are able to capture lived experiences using social media, which challenges prevailing religious and caste narratives because of its low access barriers. For example, Facebook pages like "Namma Karnataka" honor subaltern folklore, and the "Dalit Camera" channel amplifies grassroots voices through uncensored interviews. As demonstrated by the 2021 Panchamasali Lingayat reservation protests, crowdfunding websites like as Milaap assist underprivileged communities in paying legal disputes. Visibility, however, frequently brings criticism: Muslim producers claim algorithmic shadowbans, while Dalit campaigners experience online persecution. Notwithstanding these obstacles, digital platforms continue to be essential for democratizing representation by giving underrepresented people a say in how their political futures are shaped³.

Establishment of Virtual Communities and Networks

Caste-based WhatsApp groups, such "Kuruba Sangha," allow for real-time coordination of demonstrations and voter mobilization. In order to strengthen religious unity, Lingayat seers use YouTube livestreams to speak to their global followers. On Reddit's r/kannada, Kannada language advocates fight against English dominance in Bengaluru's software industry. These online networks frequently cut across geographic boundaries. For example, the Kodava diaspora uses Facebook to maintain cultural customs, and Veerashaiva forums discuss doctrinal

reforms. By fusing education and identity politics, gamified apps such as "Kannada Kali" encourage linguistic pride among young people. Such isolated networks run the risk of creating echo chambers, though. Vokkaliga-centric Telegram groups exacerbated conflicts during the 2022 election by disseminating casteist messages directed at competing communities. On the other hand, interfaith projects like "Bengaluru Together" demonstrate the possibility of positive communication by bridging Hindu-Muslim gaps through Instagram polls. As viral celebrity turns into electoral currency, the development of influencer-politicians like MLA Tejasvi Surya further blurs the lines between online and offline activity.

Exacerbation of Identity-Based Problems

Divisive content is given preference by algorithms; according to a 2022 study, anti-reservation tirades on Karnataka YouTube channels garnered three times as much interaction as neutral remarks. Similar to the Hijab controversy, which started as a local school dispute but gained national attention after TikTok videos presented it as "Muslim separatism," the Cauvery conflict resurfaces on social media on a regular basis, with fake news and AI-generated maps fueling enmity between Tamil and Kannadiga. Politicians take advantage of these patterns. For example, in 2022, riots were sparked when a BJP MP posted a manipulated video blaming descendants of Tipu Sultan of "land jihad." On the other hand, progressive initiatives like "#NoCasteInKarnataka" gained international attention and put pressure on lawmakers to uphold anti-discrimination legislation. Real-time coverage of caste panchayats is made possible by livestreaming services such as Namma TV, which both sensationalize trauma and expose injustices. Identity is solidified as a zero-sum game where complaints are exploited and turned into weapons by this amplification dynamic.

Novel Approaches to Political Activation

WhatsApp forwards and Spotify playlists are used by crowdsourced initiatives like "Jai Bhima" (Dalit solidarity) to inspire young people. The Congress party's "40% Sarkara" meme campaign, which focused on the BJP's corruption claims, struck a chord with urban voters during the 2022 elections. Parties can divide supporters based on language and caste by using micro-targeting methods. For example, BJP commercials in coastal Karnataka invoke Hindu nationalism, while JDS advertisements in Old Mysore regions highlight Vokkaliga pride⁴. Issue-based movements are fueled by crowdfunding sites; farmers, for instance, used Ketto to fund demonstrations against the Karnataka Land Reforms Act. Digital mobilization, however, also carries the potential of superficial engagement, since "slacktivism"—such as changing profile frames—often takes the place of in-person action. Nevertheless, the 2022 TikTok strikes by the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha showed how digital technologies may coordinate large-scale protests, fusing offline influence with online virality.

Karnataka's Political Engagement and Social Media

In Karnataka, digital platforms have changed the way people participate in elections. 62% of voters said they saw political content on WhatsApp every day in 2022, and urban young relied on Instagram reels to attack candidates. The Congress's "Nava Karnataka" software gamifies policy feedback, whereas the BJP's "Digital Shakti" campaign trains female influencers to propagate Hindutva narratives instead. However, there are disparities in participation: older voters and rural women continue to be underrepresented online. Although "Karnataka Votes" and other fact-checking campaigns fight false information, politicians' deepfake videos continue to influence voters who aren't yet made up their minds. Online petitions show how digital lobbying affects policymaking (e.g., Change.org campaigns for Bengaluru's infrastructure). However, exposure is distorted by algorithmic biases: dominant caste speakers frequently stifle underprivileged viewpoints. For example, #LingayatPride is a yearly fad, but Dalit hashtags are not as popular. Town halls that are livestreamed, like as ones hosted by MLA Priyank Kharge, increase openness while appealing to tech-savvy viewers. In the end, inclusive digital literacy initiatives are necessary since, although social media increases political participation, it also perpetuates offline injustices⁵.

Rules and Policies of the Government

Karnataka's IT Policy 2020 places a high priority on digital inclusiveness; however, it does not include any protections against hate speech based on identification. Section 66A of the Karnataka Police Act, which was repealed nationwide in 2015, was abused to detain Muslim students for posting "anti-national" content on social media. A social media Regulatory Authority was suggested by the state in 2022, requiring platforms to delete casteist and communal content within 24 hours. But enforcement is still weak; according to Facebook's transparency reports, just 30% of hate speech in Kannada is reported. For fact-checking, the government works with FACTly and Alt News, although partisan websites like "Karnataka Janatha" avoid criticism. Though it established precedents, the Karnataka High Court's 2022 decision to monitor hate speech online erodes confidence. Villagers are unintentionally exposed to radicalization while receiving e-governance training through the state's "Digital Grama" program. Police in remote areas lack the resources to track down anonymous accounts, and cybersecurity is still underfunded. Although Karnataka's rules acknowledge the dangers posed by digital technology, their execution shows a conflict between societal peace and free speech.

Problems and Issues

Polarization in Politics

Algorithmic echo chambers exacerbate divisions: according to a 2022 survey, Vokkaliga groups share anti-Lingayat memes, whereas 68% of Lingayat WhatsApp users only consume pro-reservation content. TikTok duets stoked animosity as the hijab controversy divided Karnataka's online communities between Hindu and Muslim "camps." Politicians take advantage of this: Kodagu riots were caused by a BJP MLA's tweet that compared Tipu Sultan

to "terrorists."

Misinformation Spread

AI-generated voice notes encouraging violence while posing as Siddaramaiah were among the fake news during the Cauvery demonstrations. Church vandalism occurred in 2022 as a result of a WhatsApp message that went viral and made false claims that Christian missionaries were "buying" Hindu orphans. Actors impersonating farmers in deepfake films exacerbated the border issue between Maharashtra and Belagavi.

Effects on Social Unity

Digital identity politics undermine trust: family pressure from online caste groups was blamed for a 20% drop in intercaste weddings in Bengaluru (2021–2022). Twitter users are already calling for boycotts of festivals like Ugadi if their organizers use "secular" themes. However, programs like "Mysuru Harmony" highlight the possibilities of digital unity by promoting interfaith iftars through Facebook events.

Influence on Karnataka's Political Conversation

Social media has caused the conversation to move from policy to personality: serious discussions are overshadowed by viral memes that make fun of politicians' accents, such as HD Kumaraswamy's English. Despite pressuring lawmakers to address civic issues, hashtag activism—such as #SaveNammaBengaluru—prioritizes band-aid solutions above long-term reform. The majority of clickbait is identity-driven; YouTube channels simplify complicated topics like reservations into "Us vs. Them" dichotomies. Digital dissent, however, also holds those in positions of authority responsible; the 2022 "#40PercentCommission" campaign revealed corruption and compelled administrative changes. Politicians now craft their speeches to go viral online; Siddaramaiah's "Kannada First" tweets play on linguistic pride, while BJP's CT Ravi uses reels to invoke Hindu icons. However, the quality of the discourse suffers as offensive hashtags like #LingayatVsVokkaliga drown out complex conversations about caste economics.

In conclusion

Social media's reimagining of Karnataka's identity politics highlights a paradox: although digital platforms strengthen historical divisions, they also give voice to underrepresented groups. Dominant castes and partisan players use technology as a weapon to maintain hegemony, while Dalit activists and minority groups use it for justice. Despite being progressive, the state's regulatory measures are not keeping up with the speed of hate and false information on the internet. Digital literacy initiatives and open content moderation frameworks must be Karnataka's top priorities going ahead in order to empower rural people. While grassroots digital storytelling can maintain plurality, collaborative fact-checking efforts and algorithmic accountability may help to lessen polarization. Karnataka, the innovation hub of India, has a rare chance to set an example for balanced digital governance, one that capitalizes on social media's democratizing potential without compromising social cohesion. In the end, Karnataka's democratic ethos must be renegotiated in light of identity politics' development in the digital era, so that algorithms and bytes benefit not only the powerful but also the variety of voices that shape

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