

PURSUING AN AGGRESSIVE HINDUTVA IN KARNATAKA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Minorities Incl. Linguistic Minorities - Schemes & their performance; Mechanisms, Laws, Institutions & Bodies

Class 10 students verify their hall ticket numbers displayed on a notice board of a government school before the commencement of the annual SSLC exams in Bengaluru. | Photo Credit: AFP

A wave of social unrest has been sweeping Karnataka, a State well known for peace and harmony and for being host to India's information technology revolution in the capital city of Bengaluru. Of late, this Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-ruled State has seen a spate of incidents aimed at spreading communal hate and denting the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. Although these incidents have largely been localised, their recurrence and the government's tacit approval of them are matters of serious concern. Obviously linked to the Assembly elections due in a year's time, the situation is likely to persist unless met with a decisive rebuff from civil society.

The controversy over students wearing the hijab in classrooms, incidents of some right-wing fringe organisations barring Muslim vendors at temple fairs, and the campaign against halal meat are in continuation of a long train of such events in quick and calculated succession. An open economic boycott of Muslims from public places is unprecedented even in coastal Karnataka, which is considered as an incubation centre of hard-line Hindutva politics, much less in the rest of the State.

The communal scene took a turn for the worse especially after Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai took over from his predecessor B.S. Yediyurappa in mid-2021. Under Mr. Yediyurappa, who was nurtured in diehard Hindutva traditions, the right-wing fringe groups were a little restrained, and the government was not seen as openly backing the Hindutva agenda. Ironically, under Mr. Bommai, whose roots are in socialist traditions of the undivided Janata Dal, fringe groups seem to be having a field day, and the state policy has moved rightward. The BJP has clearly revised its political strategy in Karnataka. It has abandoned its earlier tactic of toeing a less aggressive Hindutva line combined with highly localised, caste-based electoral mobilisation; it is instead pursuing an aggressive Hindutva agenda now, in the run-up to the elections in early 2023.

So far, the BJP has never been able to win a simple majority in Karnataka, the only southern State where it has a considerable base. On both occasions when it formed the government (2008 and 2019) it had to cobble together a majority by driving dissension in the Opposition ranks. Moreover, despite years of hard work by both the party and its ideological partners, the BJP has not been able to build a stable support base across the State. Its expansion draws primarily on the popularity of individual leaders who secure the support of their fellow caste voters. Thanks to Mr. Yediyurappa, the party has the backing of the dominant Lingayats. It enjoys the support of a considerable chunk of the Scheduled Tribes of central Karnataka because of another leader, B. Sriramulu. It has managed to cultivate a section of Dalits, who felt shortchanged by successive Congress regimes, through political patronage. These social constituencies support the BJP because of their loyalty to leaders and not because of fidelity to the party's ideology.

The BJP is now seeking a more reliable and ideologically driven social base unmediated by individual leaders. It expects a religion-based polarisation of voters to help achieve this. The BJP and its frontal organisations are thus busy spreading its known narrative of projecting Hindus as

victims of historical injustice, Muslims as enemies of the nation, and the Congress as an 'anti-Hindu' party. A series of laws and policies have either been passed or are in the offing to appease Hindus and rein in Muslims. Prominent among them are an anti-cow slaughter law, an anti-conversion law, a law to free temples from government control, and a proposal to make the study of the Bhagavad Gita compulsory in schools.

In parallel, right-wing fringe groups constantly scout for issues ranging from alleged 'love jihad' to cow slaughter to the use of loudspeakers in mosques, which can potentially polarise Hindu and Muslim voters. The hijab controversy helped the right wing take the 'us' versus 'them' narrative to the classrooms. Kannada billboards displayed at various places as part of the economic boycott of Muslims declared that Muslims were unwelcome to the venue of temple fairs as "they do not follow the law of the land, disrespect the judiciary, and mercilessly butcher the sacred cow". The reference to disrespect for the judiciary is about a bandh observed by Muslim traders to express their concern over the Karnataka High Court verdict disallowing Muslim girls from wearing the hijab in classrooms.

As fringe groups go on enforcing moral policing and economic boycott of Muslims, the government's default response has been either silence or extension of tacit support. The Law Minister sought to justify the ban on Muslim vendors from temple fairs by pointing to a previous, unrelated Government Order that disallowed the leasing out of properties adjacent to temple premises to non-Hindus. The Chief Minister virtually justified rampant incidents of moral policing saying they were "mere reactions". He initially refused to speak on the campaign against halal meat. Only when entrepreneur Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw took to Twitter to express concern over the economic implications of communal politics did he respond saying the matter would be investigated. The government's complicity in and sanction for the spread of hate has emboldened the perpetrators, making a mockery of the rule of law. As a retired bureaucrat cryptically put it: earlier it was common for the people of Karnataka to worry about the prospects of their State becoming an Uttar Pradesh; now, the people of Uttar Pradesh have every reason to worry about their State becoming a Karnataka.

There is a view that the Karnataka electorate does not accept aggressive Hindutva. A case in favour of this view is the decisive rejection of the BJP in coastal Karnataka in the 2013 elections after the region saw a spate of attacks on churches. However, this is not enough to conclude that Karnataka voters have a characteristic distaste for the politics of communal divide. In the coastal region, the BJP followed the same strategy more stridently in 2018 and won 16 of 19 seats. The coastal experiment has given confidence to the BJP to try out the same electoral strategy in other parts of the State.

A counter-narrative built around the State's vaunted traditions of social harmony and the havoc that divisive politics will potentially inflict on Karnataka's economic image and strength is hardly forthcoming. The State Congress seems to be in eternal confusion when it comes to confronting communal politics. The Congress has not yet come out with an effective strategy to counter the politics of hate as it seems to be worried about offending the Hindu voters. The Janata Dal (Secular) is more vocal, but it takes a case-on-case position, rather than a consolidated stand against communalism. The response from civil society has been sporadic and dispersed, if not totally muted.

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