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The Social Origins of Political Power in Karnataka: Stable Caste and Class Dominance

Dharmanna Madar, Dr. Basavaraja G

Research Scholar, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University Tumkur, Karnataka, India

Professor, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University Tumkur, Karnataka, India

ABSTRACT: "The Social Origins of Political Power in Karnataka: Stable Caste and Class Dominance" explores the intricate relationship between caste, class, and political power in the Indian state of Karnataka. This study delves into the historical and sociopolitical evolution of Karnataka to understand how entrenched social hierarchies have shaped the political landscape over time. The abstract provides an overview of the research's central thesis, which posits that the enduring dominance of certain caste and class groups in Karnataka has led to a relatively stable political power structure. This stability, while contributing to continuity and predictability in governance, also reinforces social stratification and limits the political mobility of marginalized groups. The research utilizes a combination of historical analysis, socio-economic data, and political science theories to trace the origins and evolution of political power in Karnataka. It highlights key periods in the state's history, such as the pre-colonial era, British colonial rule, and post-independence developments, to illustrate how caste and class dynamics have persisted and adapted to changing political contexts. A significant part of the study focuses on the role of dominant castes, such as the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, in shaping political power. These groups have historically leveraged their socio-economic status to maintain political influence, often at the expense of lower-caste and minority communities. The research also examines the interplay between economic resources, land ownership, and political authority, emphasizing how economic capital translates into political power. The abstract underscores the implications of stable caste and class dominance for contemporary Karnataka. It argues that while this stability has brought certain benefits, such as effective governance and economic development, it also poses challenges for social justice and inclusive democracy. The study calls for a nuanced understanding of Karnataka's political power structure to address these challenges and promote a more equitable political landscape.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Class, Political power, Karnataka, Social hierarchies, Dominant castes, Socio-economic status, Historical evolution, Political stability, social stratification

I. INTRODUCTION

Karnataka, a state in southern India, boasts a complex and rich history, deeply influenced by a tapestry of cultural, social, and political dynamics. At the heart of this historical evolution lies the intricate interplay of caste and class, which has persistently shaped the distribution of political power within the state. Historically, Karnataka has been home to a variety of powerful dynasties, such as the Kadambas, the Chalukyas, the ashtrakutas, the Hoysalas, and the Vijayanagara Empire. These empires not only contributed to the region's architectural and cultural heritage but also laid the groundwork for a social hierarchy that would influence the political landscape for centuries. The social structure in Karnataka, like much of India, has been significantly influenced by the varna system, which later evolved into the more rigid caste system. This system stratified society into distinct groups, often determining one's social status, occupation, and, critically, access to political power. In contemporary Karnataka, the legacy of this caste system continues to play a crucial role in politics. The Lingayats and Vokkaligas, two dominant land-owning castes, have historically held significant sway over the political arena. The Lingayats, a community following a distinct Shaivite tradition, have been particularly influential in northern Karnataka, while the Vokkaligas, primarily agrarian, have been dominant in the southern part of the state. These groups have not only controlled substantial economic resources but have also translated their economic clout into political influence, often determining electoral outcomes and policy directions¹. The post-independence period saw the rise of various political movements that sought to challenge the entrenched dominance of these castes. The Congress Party, for instance, leveraged its inclusive platform to garner support across different social strata. However, caste-based mobilization remained a potent force, with regional parties like the Janata Dal (Secular) emerging to represent specific caste interests. The interplay of caste and politics became even more pronounced with the implementation of reservation policies aimed at uplifting the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes,

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/book/25320/chapter-abstract/192326023?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

and Other Backward Classes. These policies, while promoting social justice, also reshaped the political landscape by empowering previously marginalized communities². Class dynamics have intersected with caste to further complicate the political equation in Karnataka. The rise of the urban middle class, fueled by economic liberalization and the IT boom in cities like Bangalore, has introduced new dimensions to political power. This segment, often transcending traditional caste boundaries, brings different priorities and influences to the political sphere, such as a focus on development, governance, and infrastructure. Moreover, the relationship between caste and class is not static. Economic changes can alter the social hierarchy, as seen in the increasing political participation of castes that have gained economic strength. For instance, the Kurubas, traditionally a shepherd community, have seen a rise in political influence as they have diversified into agriculture and other businesses.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

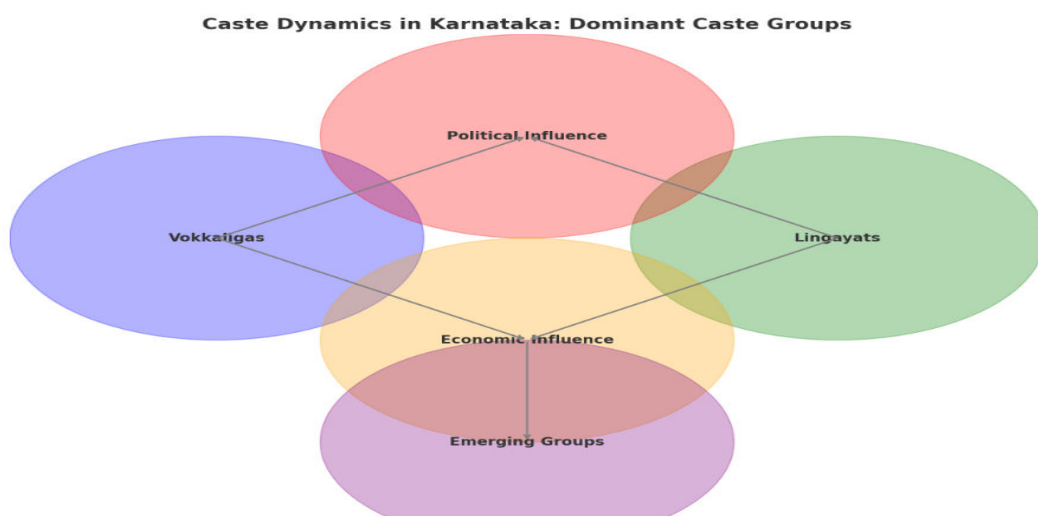
Pre-Colonial and Colonial Periods

Karnataka's history is rich and multifaceted, dating back to ancient times with notable contributions from various regional dynasties. Among the most significant was the Vijayanagara Empire, which reigned from the 14th to the 17th centuries and was known for its patronage of art, culture, and architecture, leaving a lasting legacy in the region. Prior to and during the Vijayanagara Empire, numerous smaller kingdoms and empires, such as the Kadambas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, and Hoysalas, also played crucial roles in shaping the region's cultural and political landscape. The caste system, deeply entrenched in Karnataka's social fabric, dictated social and economic hierarchies. This system influenced daily life, including occupation, social interactions, and marriage. The British colonial period, which began in the 18th century, further solidified these divisions through administrative practices that reinforced caste identities. The British often employed a strategy of divide and rule, which exacerbated existing social divisions, and their census and land revenue systems codified caste distinctions in new ways, impacting socio-political dynamics.

Post-Independence Era

After India gained independence in 1947, the country underwent significant political and social changes. Karnataka was formed in 1956 through the States Reorganisation Act, which brought together Kannada-speaking regions from various provinces. This reorganization aimed to unify linguistic groups but also inherited the complex social structure of the region. In the post-independence era, Karnataka's political landscape was heavily influenced by dominant caste groups. These groups played a crucial role in shaping political alliances, leadership, and the distribution of resources. The early years of statehood saw the consolidation of power among certain castes, which set the tone for subsequent political developments.

Caste Dynamics in Karnataka



² Srinivas, M. N., & Panini, M. N. (1984). Politics and Society in Karnataka. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19(2), 69–75.



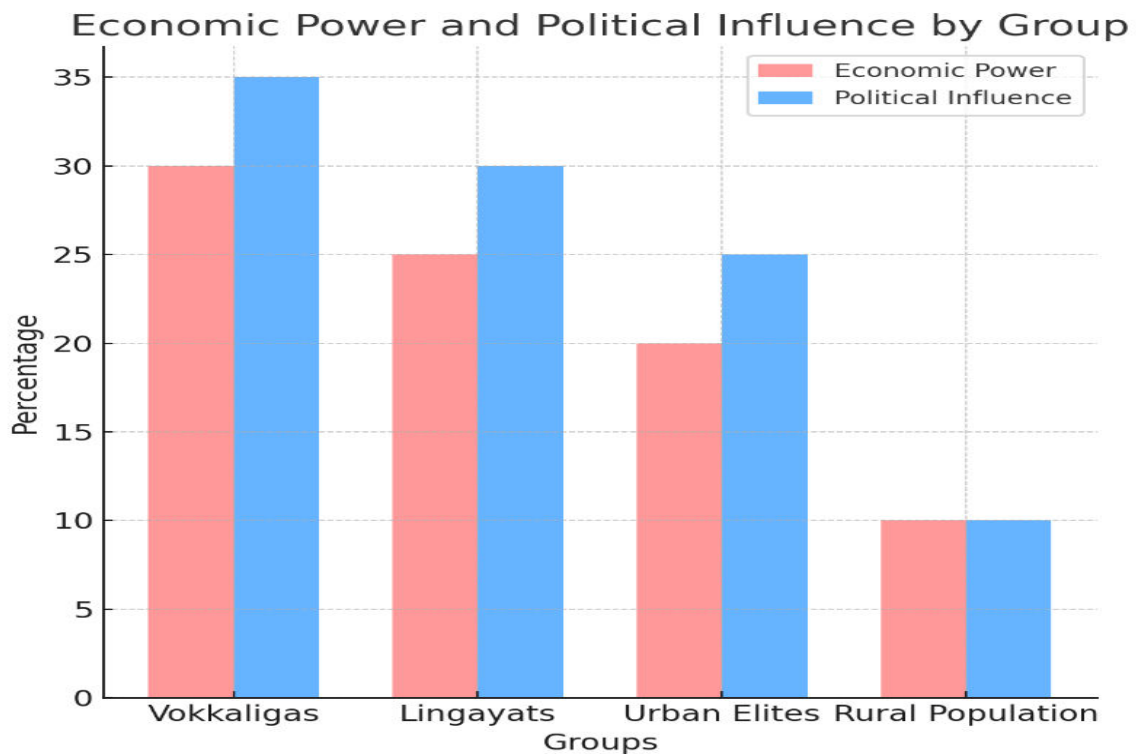
Dominant Caste Groups

Karnataka's caste dynamics are characterized by the dominance of specific groups, particularly the Vokkaligas and Lingayats. These communities have historically held significant economic and political power, often controlling agricultural land and local resources³.

Vokkaligas: Predominantly located in the southern parts of Karnataka, the Vokkaligas have maintained a stronghold in state politics through influential leaders and control over agrarian resources. They have a significant presence in districts like Mandya, Mysore, Hassan, and Bangalore Rural. The Vokkaligas' influence extends to both rural and urban areas, with prominent political leaders emerging from this community⁴.

Lingayats: Found predominantly in the northern and central regions of Karnataka, the Lingayats have been instrumental in shaping the state's political landscape. Their substantial economic base is supported by control over agriculture and a network of educational institutions. Regions like Belagavi, Bagalkot, Vijayapura, and Dharwad are Lingayat strongholds. The community's influence is not limited to rural areas but also extends to urban centers, where they have established significant educational and economic institutions. These dominant castes have played pivotal roles in Karnataka's politics, often forming the backbone of major political parties and movements. Their economic power, coupled with strategic alliances, has enabled them to influence policy-making and governance in the state. Over the years, other caste groups and marginalized communities have also sought greater representation and empowerment, leading to a dynamic and sometimes contentious political environment⁵.

Class Dynamics in Karnataka



Source: KARNATAKA ECONOMIC SURVEY 2021-22-M2_ENG_FINAL.pdf

³ Patil, S. H. (2007). IMPACT OF MODERNISATION AND DEMOCRATISATION ON A DOMINANT COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE LINGAYAT COMMUNITY IN KARNATAKA. The Indian Journal of Political Science, 68(4), 665–684.

⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/making-sense-of-karnatakas-caste-politics/articleshow/108727118.cms>

⁵ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/explainers/2024/Mar/10/explained-why-lingayats-vokkaligas-are-against-karnatakas-caste-census>

Economic Stratification

Karnataka's economy is multifaceted, with substantial contributions from agriculture, industry, and the services sector. Economic stratification significantly influences class dynamics, affecting access to resources and opportunities for different social groups.

- **Agrarian Economy:** Agriculture has been a cornerstone of Karnataka's economy, with vast swathes of fertile land under cultivation. Dominant caste groups, particularly the Vokkaligas in the south and the Lingayats in the north and central regions, often control these fertile lands. Their ownership of large agricultural estates has afforded them substantial economic power, which in turn translates into political influence. This agrarian wealth allows these groups to fund political campaigns, engage in community patronage, and wield significant sway in local and state governance⁶.
- **Industrial and Urban Growth:** The rise of industries and the expansion of urban centers, particularly Bengaluru (Bangalore), have introduced new economic opportunities and shifted the class dynamics within the state. Bengaluru, known as the "Silicon Valley of India," has become a global hub for the IT industry, attracting investments and skilled labor from across the country and the world. This urban and industrial growth has led to the emergence of a new class of economic elites, including business owners, tech professionals, and entrepreneurs. However, the benefits of this growth have not been evenly distributed. The urban-rural divide has widened, with significant disparities in income, education, and access to services between urban and rural populations⁷.

Political Influence of Economic Elites

Economic elites in Karnataka, often aligned with dominant caste groups, wield considerable political influence. Their financial resources enable them to support political campaigns, lobby for favorable policies, and maintain extensive networks of patronage. This economic clout allows them to secure key political positions and influence policy decisions that benefit their economic interests⁸.

III. INTERSECTION OF CASTE AND CLASS

The intersection of caste and class in Karnataka creates a complex web of social and political relationships. The dominance of certain caste groups is reinforced by their economic power, leading to a stable but unequal distribution of political influence.

- **Patronage Networks:** The interplay of caste and class dominance is maintained through extensive patronage networks. Influential leaders from dominant caste groups provide support and resources to their communities, such as employment opportunities, financial aid, and access to services, in exchange for political loyalty. These patronage systems reinforce social hierarchies and ensure continued support for the leaders from their caste and class constituencies⁹.
- **Electoral Politics:** The intersection of caste and class is particularly evident in Karnataka's electoral politics. Candidates from dominant caste groups leverage their social status and economic capital to secure votes and win elections. Campaign financing, vote-buying, and mobilization of caste-based support are common strategies used to maintain political power. The influence of economic elites in politics often results in policies that favor their interests, further entrenching their dominant position¹⁰.

⁶ https://des.karnataka.gov.in/storage/pdf-files/KARNATAKA%20ECONOMIC%20SURVEY%202021-22-M2_ENG_FINAL.pdf

⁷ https://des.karnataka.gov.in/storage/pdf-files/KARNATAKA%20ECONOMIC%20SURVEY%202021-22-M2_ENG_FINAL.pdf

⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/over-1-2-cr-families-coming-out-of-poverty-line-due-to-congress-govts-guarantee-schemes-karnataka-guv/articleshow/107624910.cms>

⁹ Thimmaiah, G. (1983). Caste and Class in Karnataka. *Social Scientist*, 11(2), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517032>

¹⁰ Thimmaiah, G. (1983). Caste and Class in Karnataka. *Social Scientist*, 11(2), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517032>

IV. POLITICAL PARTIES AND LEADERSHIP

The dominance of certain caste and class groups in Karnataka has significantly influenced the structure and functioning of the state's political parties. Major political parties, including the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), strategically align with dominant caste groups to secure electoral success and maintain political power.

Congress Party

Historically, the Congress Party has maintained strong ties with both the Vokkaligas and Lingayats. The party often fields candidates from these communities to consolidate support, reflecting the socio-political importance of these groups in Karnataka. This strategy has helped the Congress Party garner widespread support across various regions of the state. Prominent leaders from these communities, such as S.M. Krishna from the Vokkaliga community and Veerendra Patil from the Lingayat community, have played significant roles in the party's success. The Congress Party's approach has been to create a broad-based coalition, encompassing various castes and communities, to ensure electoral success.

BJP

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has also strategically aligned with dominant caste groups, particularly the Lingayats, to expand its influence in Karnataka. The Lingayat community, with its substantial economic base and socio-political clout, has been a critical support base for the BJP. Leaders like B.S. Yediyurappa, a prominent Lingayat leader, have been instrumental in strengthening the BJP's presence in the state. The BJP's efforts to appeal to the Lingayat community include addressing their specific demands and concerns, such as seeking separate religious status for Lingayats. By aligning with dominant caste groups, the BJP has been able to challenge the Congress Party's dominance and establish itself as a major political force in Karnataka¹¹.

Policy and Governance

The influence of caste and class on political power extends deeply into policy-making and governance in Karnataka. Dominant groups often advocate for policies that benefit their communities, reinforcing their socio-economic status and political influence.

Agrarian Policies

Agrarian policies in Karnataka, including those related to agriculture, land reforms, and rural development, are often shaped by the interests of dominant caste groups. These policies are designed to ensure the continued control of agrarian resources by these groups. For instance, land reform policies may be tailored to favor large landowners, who are typically from the Vokkaliga and Lingayat communities. Additionally, agricultural subsidies, irrigation projects, and rural infrastructure development are often directed towards regions dominated by these groups, ensuring their economic prosperity and political loyalty¹².

Economic Development

Economic policies in Karnataka, including those related to industrial development and urbanization, are heavily influenced by the interests of economic elites. These elites, often aligned with dominant caste groups, play a crucial role in shaping policy decisions to favor their business interests and economic growth. Urban centers like Bengaluru have seen significant investments in infrastructure, technology, and education, driven by policies that cater to the needs of the burgeoning middle and upper classes. This focus on urban development, while beneficial for economic growth, has also led to increased class disparities, with rural areas often lagging behind in terms of development and access to resources.

V. CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES

Social Inequality

The stable dominance of certain caste and class groups in Karnataka has resulted in persistent social inequalities. Marginalized communities, including Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes), often face significant barriers in accessing resources, opportunities, and political representation. Despite constitutional provisions and

¹¹ <https://theprint.in/politics/loyalists-in-modi-cabinet-yediyurappa-tightens-grip-on-karnataka-bjp-but-disquiet-among-lingayats/2128446/>

¹²

affirmative action policies aimed at uplifting these communities, social hierarchies remain deeply entrenched, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion¹³.

Access to Resources: Marginalized communities frequently encounter obstacles in accessing essential resources such as land, education, healthcare, and employment. Land ownership remains skewed, with dominant caste groups controlling large agricultural tracts, while Dalits and Adivasis typically own smaller, less fertile plots or work as landless laborers. This disparity limits their economic opportunities and reinforces their socio-economic marginalization.

Political Representation: Although there are reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislative bodies, meaningful political representation remains limited. The influence of dominant caste groups often overshadows the voices of marginalized communities, resulting in policies and governance structures that do not adequately address their needs. The political landscape is thus marked by an underrepresentation of Dalits and Adivasis in key decision-making roles, impeding progress towards social justice and equity¹⁴.

Political Fragmentation

The dominance of specific caste and class groups can lead to political fragmentation and conflict, as marginalized communities seek greater representation and equity. This dynamic is evident in the rise of smaller political parties and movements advocating for the rights of these marginalized groups.

Emergence of Smaller Parties: In response to the dominance of major parties like the Congress and BJP, which are often aligned with dominant caste groups, smaller political parties and regional movements have emerged. These groups aim to represent the interests of marginalized communities and challenge the established power structures. Examples include the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which focuses on the rights of Dalits, and various regional parties that advocate for the interests of specific communities.

Conflict and Mobilization: The quest for greater representation and equity has sometimes led to social and political conflicts. Protests, demonstrations, and other forms of mobilization are common as marginalized communities strive to assert their rights and demand fair treatment. These movements highlight the deep-seated grievances and aspirations of these communities, underscoring the need for more inclusive and responsive governance¹⁵.

Critiques of Existing Systems

Critiques of Karnataka's socio-political systems often focus on the entrenchment of caste and class hierarchies, calling for comprehensive reforms to address the root causes of inequality and exclusion.

Affirmative Action: While affirmative action policies have had some success in improving the socio-economic status of marginalized groups, critics argue that these measures are insufficient. They call for more robust and targeted interventions, such as increased reservations in education and employment, enhanced social welfare programs, and more effective implementation of existing policies.

Structural Reforms: Advocates for social justice emphasize the need for structural reforms to dismantle entrenched power structures. This includes land reforms to ensure equitable distribution of agricultural land, economic policies that promote inclusive growth, and political reforms to enhance the representation and participation of marginalized communities in governance.

Education and Awareness: Raising awareness and improving education about social inequalities and the importance of equity are also crucial. Empowering marginalized communities through education and advocacy can help them better navigate socio-political systems and assert their rights more effectively. Recent Trends and Developments Changing Political Landscape In recent years, Karnataka has witnessed shifts in its political landscape, with new alliances and political movements emerging. The rise of regional parties and the increasing assertiveness of marginalized communities are challenging the traditional dominance of established caste and class groups¹⁶.

¹³ Thimmaiah, G. (1983). Caste and Class in Karnataka. *Social Scientist*, 11(2), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517032>

¹⁴ Thimmaiah, G. (1983). Caste and Class in Karnataka. *Social Scientist*, 11(2), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517032>

¹⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Minorities/UNDPMarginalisedMinorities.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Minorities/UNDPMarginalisedMinorities.pdf>

VI. IMPACT OF ECONOMIC CHANGES

Economic changes, particularly those driven by globalization and technological advancements, are profoundly reshaping class dynamics in Karnataka. The rise of the tech industry and the rapid urbanization of cities like Bengaluru are central to these transformations, creating new economic opportunities while also introducing new forms of inequality and class stratification. Bengaluru, often referred to as the "Silicon Valley of India," has become the epicenter of Karnataka's economic transformation. The city's burgeoning tech industry has attracted significant domestic and international investments, leading to the proliferation of IT parks, tech startups, and multinational corporations. This influx has generated a plethora of high-paying jobs, attracting a diverse and skilled workforce from across India and the world. Consequently, a new urban middle class has emerged, characterized by higher educational qualifications, technological proficiency, and increased disposable incomes. This class is distinct in its economic behavior, consumption patterns, and socio-cultural outlook, often aligning more with global trends than traditional local practices. Urbanization has not only transformed the economic landscape but also the social fabric of Karnataka. The influx of professionals into Bengaluru has led to the rapid expansion of urban infrastructure, including housing, transportation, and social amenities¹⁷. Neighborhoods have evolved to cater to the demands of this new demographic, with luxury apartments, shopping malls, and international schools becoming commonplace. This urban growth has created a dynamic, cosmopolitan environment that contrasts sharply with the more traditional, agrarian life in rural Karnataka. However, the benefits of this economic boom are not uniformly distributed. While the tech industry has created wealth and employment for many, it has also exacerbated socio-economic inequalities. The cost of living in urban centers, particularly Bengaluru, has skyrocketed, making it difficult for lower-income groups to afford basic amenities. The urban poor, often working in low-wage, informal sectors, face significant challenges in accessing quality housing, healthcare, and education. This economic disparity is further accentuated by the displacement of local communities due to urban development projects, leading to social dislocation and loss of livelihoods¹⁸. Rural areas of Karnataka have also felt the impact of economic changes, albeit in different ways. The rise of urban centers has led to a migration of the rural workforce towards cities in search of better opportunities. This migration has both positive and negative repercussions. On one hand, remittances from urban migrants contribute to rural economies, improving living standards for some families. On the other hand, the exodus of the younger, more educated population can lead to a depletion of human capital in rural areas, hindering agricultural productivity and local development. Moreover, the integration of Karnataka's economy into global markets has brought both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The state's tech industry, while thriving, is susceptible to global economic fluctuations, policy changes, and competition. Agricultural sectors, too, face pressures from global trade practices, impacting prices and market stability for local farmers. In response to these economic changes, there is a growing discourse around sustainable and inclusive development. Policymakers, businesses, and civil society organizations are increasingly recognizing the need to bridge the urban-rural divide and address the inequities exacerbated by rapid economic growth. Initiatives focusing on rural development, skill enhancement, affordable housing, and social security are being explored to ensure that the benefits of economic advancements are more evenly distributed across different segments of society¹⁹.

VII. CONCLUSION

The social origins of political power in Karnataka are intricately woven into the fabric of caste and class dynamics. Historically, the stable dominance of certain caste groups, such as the Vokkaligas and Lingayats, has been reinforced by their significant economic power. This confluence of social hierarchy and economic control has profoundly shaped the political landscape of the state, creating a structure where power is often concentrated in the hands of a few dominant groups. These groups have wielded considerable influence over political parties, policy-making, and governance, ensuring that their interests are prioritized and their socio-economic status remains unchallenged. However, the dynamics of caste and class in Karnataka are not static. Emerging trends and challenges are beginning to reshape this long-standing equilibrium. One of the most significant developments is the increasing political mobilization of marginalized communities. Dalits, Adivasis, and other historically oppressed groups are becoming more vocal and organized in their demands for equity and representation. This mobilization is evident in the rise of smaller political parties and movements that focus on the rights and needs of these communities. As these groups gain traction, they challenge the dominance of traditional power structures, advocating for a more inclusive and representative political system. Economic changes, driven by globalization and technological advancements, are also influencing the future

¹⁷ <https://www.ibef.org/states/karnataka-presentation>

¹⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/karnatakas-economic-engine-not-geographically-balanced-says-chairman-of-cii-karnataka/article67930010.ece>

¹⁹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2012/04/18/solomon-islands-rural-development-program>

trajectory of political power in Karnataka. The rise of the tech industry and the rapid urbanization of cities like Bengaluru have created new economic opportunities and reshaped class structures. A new urban middle class has emerged, characterized by higher educational qualifications and increased disposable incomes. This shift is not just economic but also socio-cultural, introducing new perspectives and priorities into the political discourse. However, these changes have also brought new forms of inequality, as the benefits of economic growth are unevenly distributed, exacerbating the urban-rural divide and creating new socio-economic challenges. Understanding these complexities is essential for addressing social inequalities and fostering inclusive development in Karnataka. As the state navigates these evolving dynamics, there is a pressing need for policies that promote social justice, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive governance. This involves not only addressing the historical inequities rooted in caste and class but also adapting to the new realities brought about by economic transformations. Effective political leadership will need to engage with diverse constituencies, recognize the aspirations of marginalized communities, and craft policies that ensure broad-based development. The interplay of caste and class has historically shaped the political power in Karnataka, but emerging trends indicate a shift towards a more complex and dynamic landscape. The increasing political mobilization of marginalized groups and the impact of economic changes are likely to influence the future trajectory of power in the state. Addressing these evolving dynamics requires a nuanced understanding and a commitment to fostering inclusive development, ensuring that all sections of society can participate in and benefit from Karnataka's progress.

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