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POLITICAL REFORMATION IN KARNATAKA DURING DEVARAJ URS

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ABSTRACT

Devaraj URS gave a new political alignment to such aspirations by splitting the non-Brahmins into Backward Classes and forward castes when he became the Chief Minister in 1972. He had created new political space and fought against the dominance of two communities Lingayaths and Vokkaligas in Karnataka state. He succeeded considerably as the champion of social justice and economic development of the weaker sections. URS also promoted a good number of leaders representing the oppressed sections of society in the political sector. The social dynamics among backward classes in the region had brought to the fore new political equations. URS consciously carried out social engineering and political organization of the oppressed sections of society. He initiated a process of broadening and deepening democracy in the state. He succeeded in achieving the paradigm shift in Karnataka state despite stiff resistance from the dominant powers. URS argued that the disadvantaged groups within religious groupings and minorities need to be brought within the net of affirmative action. He remains in the history of Karnataka politics as the patron of the voiceless, penniless and powerless sections of society through his historical contributions for social justice-centered politics. Devaraj URS pursued the processes of enablement and democratic inclusion of backward sections of the society in Karnataka state. He achieved commendable success in social mobilization, political organization, inclusive politics and political empowerment of the neglected and disadvantaged sections.

KEYWORDS: *Political Alignment, Political Empowerment, Backward Classes and Minorities*

INTRODUCTION

Historical Context

- The articulation of caste in national politics cannot be simply read through an all-India lens in a pluralistic society like India. The relation between the upper castes and the lower castes is not merely a matter of unequal distribution of power. The privileged sections simply believe that they are born to rule and derived the divine power to dominate civil society. The institutional expression of the upper castes is endorsed by the caste system which has denied social equality, economic justice and political power to the weaker sections of society.
- The Mysore rulers were guided by the enlightened political consciousness and opposed the monopoly of political power by any dominant community. They felt that the public, being constituted under the emerging nationalist and democratic dispensation, was largely defined by a set of dominant castes. They rightly believed that the continued political and economic dominance of the Vokkaligas and Veerashaivas would nullify the spirit of independence. They constituted the Miller Commission in 1919 and ensured the benefit of reservation in

education and employment sectors to the backward communities. Prior to the unification of Karnataka in 1956 Vokkaligas constituted the largest caste group in the Mysore state. As per the1930 Census, the last census based on caste-wise enumeration, they formed 20.4% of the population of the Mysore State while Brahmins, Lingayats, and Muslims constituted 3.8, 12.0 and 5.8%, respectively (Manor, 1977:11).

- In Madras province, Periyar had led Dravidian movement, created Dravidian consciousness and prepared grounds for the political empowerment of Dravidians. In Bombay province, Phuley had led a strong social movement against caste-based oppression and created new consciousness among Dalits and backwards about their political rights. The Mysore state could not go through an ideological churning that the non-brahmin and self-respect movement wrought in the Madras and Bombay province.
- In 1961, following unification, the proportion of the Lingayat community rose to 15.5%, pushing the Vokkaligas to the third position of 12.98%, the second group being the Scheduled Castes (Government of Mysore, 1961). About one-third of the members of the assembly from 1957 to 1967 belonged to the Lingayat community and Vokkaligas commanded twice the number of seats in the assembly relative to their population size. The same was the case with Brahmins as well. These three caste groupings with a share of one-third of the population had over two-thirds of the seats in the assembly from 1952-1967. The Congress regime in the state led by S Nijalingappa had attempted to appropriate to Lingayat community all the social capital. The caste and community associations had become a widespread phenomenon in the Mysore state from the early 20th century.

New Political Alignment

- Devaraj URS gave a new political alignment to such aspirations by splitting the non-Brahmins into Backward Classes and forward castes when he became the Chief Minister in 1972. URS gathered a number of persons around him from the non-dominant backward classes, Dalits, and minorities and made them occupy positions of great public importance (Kohli, 1982:10). The politics of the dominant powers was thoroughly understood by Devaraj URS.
- The most important policy which was taken up for enacting legislation and effective implementation was the abolition of various types of tenancies in the state under the leadership of Devaraj URS (Thimmaiah and Aziz, 1984:26). Devaraj URS had made a difference in his policies to develop the state on the basis of human values including the social justice-centered development.
- URS created new political space and fought against the dominance of two communities Lingayaths and Vokkaligas in Karnataka (Manor, 1990:12). The lower castes have consistently remained at the receiving end in all walks of life in caste-ridden Indian society. URS was deeply aware that the political unification of Karnataka had a profound impact on the redistribution of power in the state across different caste groups, particularly due to the significance of the demographic shift. With unification, the Lingayats had emerged as the most numerous caste group in the state.

- Men like Bahuguna and Chandra Shekar in UP and Devaraj URS in Karnataka were seen as potential claimants to power at the center on the basis of their populist mobilization in the states. The response, short-sighted through it may have been, was to completely abandon any semblance of inner-party democracy within the Congress and to hoist state and local leaders from the top (Jalal, 1995:08). URS was a great champion of democracy and opposed authoritarianism of Indira Gandhi to the core. Congress had to taste the political defeat after the death of URS and remained vulnerable politically for several years.
- URS had identified two major priorities after becoming Chief Minister of Karnataka such as the organization of Dalits, minorities and backwards politically and empowerment of the downtrodden communities economically. He was able to manage both the Congress Party and Government in the company of young, talented and competent comrades, ministerial colleagues and bureaucrats. He succeeded considerably as the champion of social justice and economic development of the weaker sections (Sadanand, 2000:22).
- URS prudential but principled approach to political action can be contrasted against those of his successors who used the reservation policy primarily to placate the Lingayats and Vokkaligas and other relatively developed castes and communities such as the Devangas, Ganigas, Padmashalis, and Catholic Christians. URS also tried to reign in radicalism which would have necessarily destabilized his government (Shetty, 2000:25). URS also promoted a good number of leaders representing the oppressed sections of society in the political sector.
- The formation of caste associations and caste federations had facilitated the process of the making of the political constituency of the Backward Classes by drawing on a common platform of active units. In the initial years of non-Brahmin movement the Vokkaligas, Lingayats, and Muslims had primarily benefited from it and secured a share in representation and employment. Eventually, the backward class constituency came to be redefined and reformulated so as to exclude the dominant sections from it. Devaraj URS had implemented the Havanur Commission Report in 1977 and consciously built a backward class constituency in Karnataka. The social dynamics among backward classes in the region had brought to the fore new political equations (Hegde, 2002:07).

Accomplishments of URS

- Karnataka state had witnessed remarkable social, economic and political changes under the political leadership of Devaraj URS. Karnataka's leaders have moved more cautiously than their counterparts in West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and the Kerala States. The ideology has counted for almost nothing in Karnataka. Politicians at the state level have long believed that their ambitions to hold power are best served by developing broadly inclusive accommodations. Urs had broken the political dominance of the upper castes and achieved a substantial and startling change (Manor, 2002:13).
- Devaraj URS led the Congress in the 1970s and enabled the downtrodden communities to gain political power. The dominant social and political powers led by Vokkaligas and Lingayats had denied political power and self-esteem to the Dalits, backward classes and minorities in the state. The dominant castes had held sway over political power which brought about the social exclusion of the downtrodden small castes and communities which remained at the receiving end. URS consciously carried out social engineering and political organization of the oppressed sections of society.

- Indira Gandhi was surrounded by Sanjay Gandhi, Dhawan, Yashpal Kapur, Dhirendra Brahmachari and other main operators of the gang. Karnataka state had given political re-birth to Indira Gandhi under the leadership of Devaraj URS. He was upset with the power politics of Sanjay Gandhi and maintained distance from Indira Gandhi. He worked for the regrouping of all Congressmen under the social and democratic leadership of progressive persons in the country. He also earned the national attention through his progressive policies and welfare centered programmes such as implementation of land reforms, elimination of zamindari system, educational progress of backward class, building hostels exclusively for oppressed classes and allocation of stipend funds for the 16,000 odd unemployed members of the minority sections of society (Chakravartty, 2008:01).
- URS had also implemented a justifiable reservation policy for the backward classes in Karnataka. His political leadership has played an important role in the development of Karnataka state. In the cabinet, URS had accommodated the Vokkaliga and Lingayat community leaders. But, there were a good number of ministers representing the backward, Dalit and minority communities. In his second term as Chief Minister (1972-1980), not even one of the fin senior-most ministers hailed from the dominant castes. Devaraj URS was deeply aware of the caste-based power politics in the state. He advocated that a minority of dominant sections of society should not continuously sit on the driver's seat and boss over a great majority of the downtrodden communities.

Unique Political Statesmanship of URS

- Devaraj URS, Chief Minister of Karnataka from 1972 to 1980 did more than any predecessor and as much as any counterpart elsewhere in India, before or since, to make the democratic process more genuine for the disadvantaged groups who form a substantial majority of the state's population. He initiated a process of broadening and deepening democracy in the state. He had to change state-level politics, and the networks connecting the state level to the villages, in ways that would undermine their power. This awakening entailed greater awareness, assertiveness, organizational strength, and discontent with dominant caste rule at the state level. He recognized the need for social change and economic development of the weaker sections of society. He had no choice but to mobilize this majority since it was the only way he could survive politically. He systematically recruited bright political activists from among the Backward Classes and the scheduled castes, both of which stand below the Lingayats and Vokkaligas in the traditional social hierarchy. These groups outnumbered the dominant castes and had long suffered at their hands, in part because the political spoils had mainly gone to the dominant landed castes (Raghavan and Manor, 2009:17).
- Devaraj URS was a political leader with a difference in the country. He succeeded in achieving the paradigm shift in Karnataka state despite stiff resistance from the dominant powers. He had followed the political ideals of Nalvadi Krishna Wodeyar, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Lohia, Periyar and other great political reformers. He provided historical political patronage to the downtrodden communities and heralded a new era of distributive justice in the political sphere.

- The key policy innovations such as Devaraj URS' land reforms and pro-backward class policies in the 1970s owed a debt to Lohia. He shaped the imagination of democracy in some of the most creative individuals in Karnataka. The 1974 land reforms of Congress Chief Minister Devaraj URS, which conferred landownership on tenants, hijacked a key plank of socialist activism in the state. The pro-backward class policies of the URS government also owed a debt to the long-time socialist policy of favoring reservations for the disadvantaged sections (Gowda, 2010:05).
- In the 1972 elections in Karnataka, there was clear cut polarization of caste groups and the intervention of URS had made a remarkable shift in the proportion of representation of different castes and communities in the state. Many backward class leaders, Dalit leaders, and minority leaders occupied ministerial positions under the Chief Ministership of Devaraj URS. There was a remarkable shift in the extent of representation both at state assembly and local levels in Karnataka. This shift in power affected Lingayat representation much more than the Vokkaligas. Devaraj URS argued that merely demanding a separate state on the plea of a shared linguistic bond did not hold appealing prospects for groups and communities likely to be excluded from the public domain.
- In 1972, URS had constituted a Backward Classes Commission under the chairmanship of L G Havanur who hailed from the backward Beda community. The commission made the target group more focused, and closer to groups experiencing backwardness rather than resting its recommendations on claims made in this regard by en-compassing caste-clusters. The commission identified the socially and educationally backward classes and recommended for reservation in education, employment, and political sectors. It was a landmark recommendation which brought about the multi-faceted empowerment of backward sections under the stewardship of Devaraj URS. It is worth mentioning, that the court also agreed to the inclusion of Muslims and Dalit converts to Christianity within the backward classes arguing that a religious community ip so facto need not be excluded from the ambit of backward classes.
- URS argued that the disadvantaged groups within religious groupings and minorities need to be brought within the net of affirmative action. He did not let the upper castes to appropriate the public as they had done in the past through the device of such a mobilization. He channeled the economic resources to the various caste-based associations and enabled them to develop social networking and gain political power.
- The feeble voice the latter have found in the public and the electoral arena was drowned by the rein-forced dominance of the powerful sections of society. There are many intellectuals and social activists in the state straddling across caste and ideological divide who subscribe to the argument that URS' initiative on the caste-front not merely enabled the backward castes and communities but strove to forge a cohesive public space across the deeply fragmented state. The extent of enablement that his political initiative brought about is closely related to associated policies of redistribution of political power, agrarian reforms, educational and employment access, and supporting a cultural domain that fostered confidence (Rodrigues, 2013:20). It is important to recognize that there were also possibilities for democratic expansion in URS' endeavor that he or his successors did not tap adequately.

- Devaraj URS had set a new trend for the classification of castes and communities in Karnataka on the basis of social justice and economic equity. The Backward Class Commissions were enabled to employ certain healthy criteria for the determination of the state of backwardness of various communities and obtain educational, employment and political reservation benefits from the government. Devaraj URS played a prominent role in mobilizing the socially and economically backward sections for their political empowerment. URS' intervention on the reservation issue had a multi-pronged impact on the backward sections of society in the state.
- Devaraj URS transformed the socio-political landscape. He put a cap on land-ownership, introduced the notion of the land to the tiller, and subsequently broke the back of the powerful Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities, which had dominated state politics since Independence (Rao, 2013:19). URS had also tried to build his political, financial and muscle power to provide able political leadership to the neglected sections of society.
- Karnataka had experienced all manners of political coalitions, power-sharing agreements, scandals, and, above all, political instability. In 1972, D. Devaraj URS was elected to power with a full majority and became the first Chief Minister to have a full 5-year term in the state. He effectively organized Dalits, backwards and minorities and demolished the dominant powers led by Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities. He had implemented several progressive measures for the social and economic progress of the backward communities, but he was totally routed politically after leaving the Congress led by Indira Gandhi.

Messaiah of the Downtrodden Communities

- The dominant powers had prevailed upon Indira Gandhi to desert URS politically. He was betrayed by his own followers and loyalists who aligned with Indira Gandhi for political gains. All these circumstances forced Urs to accept political defeat in Karnataka. Subsequently, URS established his own political outfit called Kranti Ranga and joined hands with Janata Party led by Ramakrishna Hegde, S.R. Bommaiah, H.D. Devegowda, and other leaders. He died in 1982 under the miserable political circumstances. URS remains in the history of Karnataka politics as the patron of the voiceless, penniless and powerless sections of society through his historical contributions for social justice-centered politics.
- Devaraj URS was a Democrat in the true sense of the term. He dared to question the authority of Indira Gandhi who had deviated from the political of consensus. He was loyal to the people rather than to the party high command. He was deserted by the people who were politically promoted by him since they could not understand the pro-active rule and progressive political leadership of Devaraj URS. He had strictly warned the backward sections of society to unite socially and politically to obtain their rightful share in the political sphere of life (Chengappa, 2013:02). He had emerged as a national leader when he broke off from the Congress (I) and formed the Congress(U). He could not achieve success in the political mobilization of the backward sections of society against the Congress led by Indira Gandhi. He was also badly betrayed by his own followers who pursued power politics in Karnataka state.
- Devaraj URS gave a new political alignment to marginalized social groups by building a socio-political front led by backward classes, supported by minorities and Dalits in Karnataka. The backward classes were increasingly becoming disenchanted with the political developments, which left them no space to play an important role in

self-determination. The nature of electoral politics and the primary of caste identity had placed the backward class leaders in a peculiar situation. The ruling dominant class leadership tried to undercut the socio-political edge won by backward classes under the patronage of URS (Prahalladappa, 2013:16). Devaraj URS had consolidated the political support for Congress led by Indira Gandhi.

- Devaraj URS had thoroughly grasped the caste politics in Karnataka. He identified the talented and capable backward community leaders to bring about radical political changes in the state. He was aware of the political success formula and ensured the defeat of dominant community leaders in electoral politics. He managed the political challenges and opportunities in a highly intelligent and responsible way and paved the way for the consolidation of backward castes in electoral politics.
- Devaraj URS' strenuous efforts for making Karnataka a model state are ever-green. He accorded high priority for the social networking, political mobilization and economic development of the marginalized sections of society in Karnataka. He led the state in the path of social justice-centered progressive politics and established his credentials as the true champion of the downtrodden communities (Sethi, 2014:23).

Pragmatic Progressive Policies of URS

- Devaraj URS pursued pragmatic progressive policies and tried to break the hegemony of the dominant caste in the state. The implementation of social policies and programs formed by URS' government formed the basis for social justice friendly governance by the subsequent governments (Farheen, 2014:04). URS provided a dynamic political leadership which brought about remarkable social change and economic equity in Karnataka state.
- Devaraj URS should be regarded as a role model since he pursued emancipation oriented politics in Karnataka state. He was also a large-hearted statesman who firmly stood by the principles of social justice and economic equity. He politically represented all communities and committed himself to work for the downtrodden and oppressed classes (Hariprasad, 2015:06).
- The political leadership in Karnataka was confined to dominant Vokkaliga and Lingayat communities who enjoyed social clout, economic resources, and political power. He also opened up an avenue for the previously excluded sections of society to come forward to take the leadership position in the state politics. He used every opportunity to stimulate caste sentiments in his efforts to develop his new political base. He channeled money and resources-both party funds and governmental patronage to the caste associations and public rallies. Devaraj URS practically emerged as the leader of the downtrodden communities and provided them adequate political space.
- The ideology and thinking of former Chief Minister D Devaraj URS were very much relevant in the present circumstances beset with social and political evils. The political thoughts and economic development approaches of URS can serve the people very well. He was a very progressive and committed leader who strongly propounded those political leaders must come up through hard work, grit and dedication and not on the strength of money, publicity or muscle power (Patil, 2016:15).
- After Kerala and West Bengal, URS came out with land reforms to ensure 'tills the land owns too'. He came out with reservation for OBCs, which was not even heard of in the country until then. The empowerment of other backward classes has provided opportunities to OBCs to progress, especially in education and jobs. URS is known

for the silent revolution during his career. He was influenced by socialist leader Shanthaveri Gopala Gowda (Ramesh, 2016:18).

- Devaraj URS had made a series of attempts to bring the marginalized sections of society to the political mainstream in Karnataka. He achieved success in organizing the backward sections of society for political representation and progress. He also promoted the inclusive politics which benefitted the deprived sections of society in several ways. He laid a strong foundation for the democratic enablement of the down-trodden communities in the state. He designed and implemented a specific form of instrumentalism in the politics of Karnataka state. All his political initiatives had eventually led to the reconstitution of dominance in new found ways.
- Devaraj URS had contributed immensely in building a pro-poor image of the Congress. He had strived his best for the social and political mobilization of the have-nots against the stiff opposition of the dominant caste powers. He created a new social platform for the minorities, backwards and Dalits (Ahinda) and enabled them to gain political representation in the state (Shah, 2017:24).
- Devaraj URS had espoused the cause of poor and downtrodden communities and ushered in a silent social revolution in Karnataka State. He was one of the longest -serving Chief Ministers of the State for 10 years. He abolished certain unhealthy social practices, implemented economic development programs and promoted political leadership of the backward sections of the state. URS must be remembered for his achievements in weaning away poor people from the clutches of the dominant political powers and rich moneylenders.

CONCLUSIONS

- Devaraj URS pursued the processes of enablement and democratic inclusion of backward sections of the society in Karnataka state. He achieved commendable success in social mobilization, political organization, inclusive politics and political empowerment of the neglected and disadvantaged sections. It was indeed a historical political experiment led by Devaraj URS in the 1970s as the Chief Minister and Congress Leader in Karnataka. The rule by Devaraj URS was a golden era for Karnataka. He had implemented the pro-poor 20-point social welfare programs of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi very effectively. He improved the social and economic status of the downtrodden communities on the basis of sound political leadership qualities. He brought about a tremendous political transformation in Karnataka state.
- Devaraj URS had held the post of Chief Minister of Karnataka for the full term and ruled the state for about one decade. He was replaced by R Gundu Rao in 1980 on account of political differences with Indira Gandhi (Jigeesh, 2018:09). His tenure as Chief Minister is remembered as the era of social justice-centered administration.
- Karnataka, over the generations, has seen several stalwarts and charismatic leaders come to the fore and leave their impression on the political landscape of this state. URS had the ability to take into confidence the upper castes before moving forward and facilitated the inclusive development of weaker sections on the basis of unique and dedicated political leadership (Nanaiah, 2018:14).
- There are serious concerns about the inclusiveness of Indian growth process which have arisen due to the

persistence of substantial inequalities in all walks of life in respect of backward sections. In Karnataka state, SCs, STs, and OBCs constitute the majority of the population. In recent years, equations across castes and communities have been recast precipitating intense social churning and political realignments within and across regions of yore (Rodrigues, 2018:21). The right-wing politics has grown considerably in Karnataka after the death of statesmen like URS, Hegde, Nazir Sab and others.

- The backward classes would not have got their due share in the political and social sectors without the committed and competent political patronage of Devaraj URS. He was a great visionary who initiated a series of measures for the political empowerment of backward classes. Several Dalit, backward and minority community leaders emerged due to his efforts in the state. He proved that leaders who come from deprived communities tend to understand the plight of the masses better than those who come from privileged classes.

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