



## Challenges and Struggle faced by Dalits in Karnataka Politics.

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### Abstract

Despite affirmative action laws and constitutional protections, the Dalits, who make up a sizable section of Karnataka's population, have always been on the periphery of political power. This essay explores the complex issues and ongoing difficulties that Dalits encounter in the political environment of Karnataka. Systemic obstacles still prevent meaningful representation, even with the rise of Dalit leaders, the creation of specialized political fronts like the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, subsequent parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party, and many offshoot organizations. Caste-based discrimination within major political parties, upper-caste dominance in ticket distribution, political division among Dalit sub-castes (especially between the numerically powerful Madigas and the politically assertive Holeyas), and the co-optation of Dalit voices by mainstream parties without meaningful empowerment are some of the major issues. Dalit political mobilization is further hampered by social exclusion, economic marginalization, and violence. Both resilience and internal tensions are shown by historic movements like the Dalit Panther-inspired agitation of the 1970s and more current calls for internal reservations (like the Madiga Dandora movement). Although a small Dalit elite has been produced by reservation policies, the majority are still politically underrepresented and have little influence over the creation of laws pertaining to education, land reforms, and anti-atrocity measures.

**Key Words:** Scheduled Castes politics, Dalit struggles, Dalit movement and Challenges Dalit politics

## Introduction

A sizable section of Karnataka's population, Dalits—officially known as Scheduled Castes—have long suffered from systematic social exclusion, economic marginalization, and caste-based discrimination stemming from centuries-old hierarchies. Even with constitutional protections like reservations in politics, work, and education, they still face several obstacles on their path to true political empowerment in Karnataka. Inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's principles of dignity, education, and self-respect, the contemporary Dalit movement in Karnataka acquired impetus in the 1970s with the establishment of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS). The DSS marked a change from passive acquiescence to forceful opposition by organizing Dalits against atrocities, landlessness, and untouchability. It was crucial in increasing awareness and shaping the state's larger civil rights conversation.

Deep structural and internal obstacles beset Dalit politics in Karnataka. The community has become divided due to internal divides, especially between sub-castes like Madigas (commonly classified as "Left Dalits") and Holeyas (sometimes referred to as "Right Dalits"), which have resulted in conflicting claims for leadership and reservations. Unified bargaining strength has been undermined by this subcaste consolidation. Without addressing fundamental issues like land rights, safety from violence, or real economic advancement, mainstream parties often appropriate Dalit leaders and causes for political purposes. Dalit representatives have little authority in making decisions and frequently act as proxies.

Active engagement is still discouraged by violence, social boycotts, and shame. Although recent elections (e.g., 2023) have seen minor progress with more SC women MLAs, Dalit women still endure compounded marginalization because to intersecting caste and gender hurdles. To overcome these obstacles, independent movements must be strengthened, internal disagreements must be overcome, and substantial rather than symbolic representation must be demanded. The fight for social justice and equality in India's democracy is reflected in the Dalits' political battle in Karnataka.

## Dalit Struggles Karnataka

Dalit populations in Karnataka have long battled economic inequity, social marginalization, and discrimination based on caste. Even though the Indian Constitution forbids untouchability and promises equality, many Dalits still struggle to get justice, work, education, and land ownership. Access to public resources, temples, and community places can occasionally be impacted by caste prejudice in rural communities. There have also been reports of violence and atrocities against Dalits, underscoring the need for stricter implementation of legislative provisions.

There have been notable Dalit movements in Karnataka over the years, calling for equality, social justice, and dignity. Human rights awareness, land rights, and the battle against caste discrimination have all been greatly aided by groups like the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS). Through literature, education, and public activism, Dalit writers, activists, and academics have also made contributions to social transformation.

Many Dalits now have better chances thanks to government measures including welfare programs, scholarships, and reservations in public work and education. However, certain segments of the population are still impacted by issues including poverty, unemployment, prejudice, and uneven access to resources.

The continual fight for justice, equality, and social inclusion is exemplified by the Dalits' battle in Karnataka. Building a society free from caste-based prejudice and guaranteeing equal opportunity for all requires ongoing awareness, effective law execution, education, and inclusive growth.

## Challenges of Dalit Politics in Karnataka

Dalit politics in Karnataka has played an important role in advancing social justice and political representation. However, it continues to face several structural and political challenges.

### 1. Internal Sub-caste Divisions

- Karnataka's Scheduled Castes are divided into several sub-castes, particularly **Madiga** and **Holey** communities.
- Differences over the distribution of reservation benefits have created divisions and weakened collective political mobilization.

### 2. Fragmentation of Dalit Organizations

- The movement has split into multiple factions, including different groups within the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS).
- This fragmentation reduces bargaining power and makes it difficult to present a unified political agenda.

### 3. Dependence on Mainstream Political Parties

- Most Dalit leaders are affiliated with major parties such as Indian National Congress or Bharatiya Janata Party.
- Critics argue that Dalit issues are sometimes used for electoral mobilization without sustained policy implementation.

### 4. Limited Leadership at the Highest Level

- Despite a significant Scheduled Caste population, Karnataka has never had a Dalit Chief Minister.
- Senior leaders have held important positions but have not reached the state's top executive office, highlighting limits in political representation.

### 5. Continuing Caste Discrimination

- Incidents of caste discrimination, untouchability, and violence continue in some areas.
- These social barriers limit political participation and weaken the impact of constitutional safeguards.

### 6. Reservation-Related Conflicts

- The issue of internal reservation among Scheduled Castes has remained politically contentious.
- Debates over sub-categorization have led to protests and legal disputes, creating tensions within Dalit communities.

### 7. Limited Participation of Dalit Women

- Dalit women remain underrepresented in political leadership.
- They often face the combined effects of caste and gender discrimination, making their participation in decision-making more difficult.

### 8. Economic and Social Inequalities

- Landlessness, unemployment, limited access to quality education, and poverty continue to affect many Dalit communities.
- These socioeconomic issues restrict political empowerment and leadership development.

## Objectives

- To examine the political challenges faced by Dalits in Karnataka.
- To analyse the level of political participation and representation of Dalits in Karnataka.
- To assess the efficacy of governmental policies and constitutional provisions.
- To determine the main obstacles and provide ways to improve Dalit political empowerment

## Research Design

The study will adopt a **qualitative research design** supported by quantitative data where necessary. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of the political, social, and economic challenges faced by Dalits in Karnataka while also examining electoral trends and representation.

## Research Approach

- **Descriptive Approach:** To describe the status of Dalit political participation and representation.
- **Analytical Approach:** To examine the causes of political marginalization and assess the effectiveness of constitutional safeguards and government policies.

## Dalit movement Karnataka

The Dalit Movement in Karnataka is a significant social movement that seeks to advance equality, justice, and human rights for Dalits while combating caste prejudice. When the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti (DSS), one of the most powerful Dalit groups in the state, was established in the 1970s, it grew stronger. B. R. Ambedkar, who promoted education, self-respect, and equal rights for oppressed people, served as the movement's inspiration.

The Dalit Movement fought against economic exploitation, landlessness, social injustice, and untouchability. In order to protect social dignity, decent wages, land rights, and access to education, it coordinated demonstrations, awareness campaigns, and legal measures. Additionally, the movement pushed for the successful application of constitutional protections and urged Dalits to get involved in politics.

Dalit literature was a major factor in raising awareness. Through their writings, authors like Siddalingaiah and Devanur Mahadeva brought attention to the realities of caste oppression and sparked societal change.

By opposing caste-based inequalities and uplifting vulnerable people, the Dalit Movement in Karnataka has made a substantial contribution to social justice. The movement has raised awareness, bolstered legal safeguards, and boosted Dalits' involvement in politics and education, even if prejudice still occurs in certain places. It continues to play a significant role in advancing inclusive development, equality, and dignity in Karnataka today.

## Internal Divisions Among Dalits

Formerly referred to as "untouchables," Dalits make up around 16–17% of India's population and are a varied and diversified group. Significant internal fractures shatter its social, political, and economic cohesiveness despite a common history of caste system marginalization. Sub-caste hierarchies, geographical variances, language distinctions, and socioeconomic discrepancies are the main causes of these splits. Many endogamous sub-castes (jatis), like the Mahars in Maharashtra, the Chamars in North India, the Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh/Telangana, and the Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu, are at the center. These communities frequently uphold rigid social norms that restrict commensality and intermarriage. Over example, Malas and Madigas have long fought over resources and political representation in several regions of South India, occasionally resulting in open warfare. Valmiki's and other Dalit communities in North India have comparable rivalry.

Dividends are further widened by economic difference. While the great majority of Dalits continue to work as landless farm laborers or in stigmatized jobs like manual scavenging, a small educated urban middle class has arisen as a result of reservations. The "creamy layer" elites and the rural poor, who frequently feel left behind by Dalit political activities, are at odds because of this class divide. The growth of Dalit parties and leaders is a clear indication of political fragmentation. Chamars are a major constituency of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, whereas other subcastes support other regional parties. Another layer is added by ideological differences between Hindu Dalits, Christian converts, and Ambedkarite Buddhists.

These internal conflicts impede wider anti-caste cooperation and reduce collective bargaining power against upper-caste domination. Despite Ambedkar's goal of unification by organization,

agitation, and education, pan-Dalit identity is still under threat from enduring jati awareness. For true empowerment, it is still essential to address these divisions through communication, fair resource allocation, and intersectional strategies.

### Madiga Holey conflict

Two well-known Scheduled Caste (Dalit) groups in Karnataka and portions of Andhra Pradesh/Telangana are the Madiga and Holey (also referred to as Mala). They stand for the historical divide of Dalits into "left-hand" (Madiga) and "right-hand" (Holey) groups, which has led to long-standing rivalry. Madigas have historically claimed to be more backward than Holeyas, who frequently worked in agriculture and claimed relative superiority via ideas of purity and social customs. Madigas are traditionally linked to leatherwork, tanning, and other "impure" activities in the caste order. Strict social distance is maintained between the two tribes; they have historically avoided dining together, getting married to each other, and sharing areas, which can occasionally result in open conflicts in villages.

India's reservation policy exacerbated the tension. Madigas contend that Holeyas, who are more prevalent in Old Mysore areas, have disproportionately profited from political participation, employment, and education despite the fact that both communities are subject to the SC quota. Inspired by comparable Mala-Madiga conflicts in Andhra Pradesh, Madigas, who make up around 9% of the SC population in Karnataka, have been pushing for the sub-categorization of SC reservations through initiatives like the Karnataka Madiga Dandora since the 1990s. Commissions such as the Sadashiva Commission suggested splitting SC quotas (e.g., Madiga group ~33-36%, Holey ~32%), but political opposition to their execution has resulted in riots, party realignments, and allegations of intra-Dalit discrimination. This conflict demonstrates how affirmative action may worsen subcaste hierarchies and compete for scarce resources while strengthening Dalits against higher castes.

### Historical and Structural Context

Thousands of endogamous jatis with historical hierarchies of position, employment, and ritual purity make up India's caste system. These identities were solidified and politicized by colonial measures (such as census enumeration and Sanskritization efforts) and post-independence affirmative action (reservations in legislatures, employment, and education under Articles 15, 16, and 330/332).

Significant internal variance is hidden by broad classifications like OBC or SC (previously "untouchables"). Due to superior organization, numbers, or urban access, certain sub-castes—such as the Chamars and Jatavs in Uttar Pradesh—have benefited disproportionately from reservations, while others lag behind. Demands for sub-categorization—splitting quotas to guarantee more fair distribution—have increased as a result.

### Drivers of Sub-Caste Politics

- **Uneven Benefits:** Data shows intra-group disparities in education, employment, and political representation. Sub-castes with early access to missionary education, urban jobs, or leadership (e.g., Mahars in Maharashtra vs. others) advanced faster.
- **Democratization and Fragmentation:** Post-Mandal Commission (1990s OBC reservations and rise of backward-caste parties), politics shifted from Congress dominance to multi-party competition. Smaller groups formed or influenced parties to demand "their share."
- **Electoral Arithmetic:** In states like UP, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra/Telangana, parties micro-target sub-castes for votes. Examples include Madiga (Andhra) vs. Mala (dominant SC sub-caste) movements; Nishad/VIP in Bihar; non-Jatav Dalits or non-Yadav OBCs.
- **Cultural Assertion:** Sub-castes build narratives of distinct history, myths, and pride, rejecting both upper-caste dominance and homogenization under "Dalit" or "Bahujan."

Parties across the spectrum engage: regional outfits (SP, BSP, RJD), BJP (via social engineering, outreach to non-dominant sub-castes), and Congress.

### Positive Aspects

- **Greater Inclusion:** Empowers the "most backward" within backward groups, increasing descriptive representation and pressuring for targeted welfare.
- **Checks Dominance:** Prevents a few sub-castes from monopolizing reserved seats/jobs, fostering intra-group competition and mobility.
- **Democratic Deepening:** Pluralizes politics beyond broad caste blocs, similar to how ethnic mobilization works elsewhere. Reservations have measurably increased SC/ST presence in public sector and legislatures, though gaps persist.

### Criticisms and Challenges

- **Fragmentation:** Critics argue it weakens broader solidarity (e.g., Dalit unity) and turns politics into a zero-sum scramble for quotas, hindering class-based or issue-based mobilization.
- **Perpetuation of Caste:** By institutionalizing sub-caste identities in law and elections, it may "fossilize" divisions rather than erode them over generations. Affirmative action can reconstruct identities and incentivize claims of backwardness.
- **Implementation Issues:** Requires reliable data (caste census debates continue). Risks political favouritism, legal challenges, and "creamy layer" exclusions. Sub-categorization alone doesn't address root causes like private-sector discrimination or rural underdevelopment.
- **Elite Capture:** Even within sub-castes, benefits often flow to the relatively better-off; cultural/identity focus can overshadow material concerns.

### Dalit Political Empowerment

The process of giving Dalits, who have traditionally experienced social exclusion and caste-based discrimination, equitable access to political, social, and economic decision-making is known as Dalit political empowerment. It seeks to guarantee representation, fairness, equality, and dignity in democratic institutions.

In order to increase Dalit participation, the Indian Constitution forbids untouchability, guarantees equality, and offers reservations in government employment, legislatures, and educational institutions. Dalit leaders, social groups, and political parties have all been instrumental in promoting inclusive government and increasing awareness of Dalit rights. Dalit leadership has also been reinforced by grassroots involvement through local self-government organizations, particularly with reserved seats in Panchayats and urban local bodies.

Full empowerment is nevertheless hampered by issues including caste-based violence, prejudice, resource scarcity, and underrepresentation in higher political posts. Meaningful engagement in politics is frequently hampered by social prejudice and economic disparity.

High-quality education, economic possibilities, the efficient application of constitutional protections, and increased participation in leadership positions are all necessary to strengthen Dalit political empowerment. Ensuring equitable access to justice, eradicating caste prejudice, and raising societal awareness are all equally crucial. A more inclusive, democratic, and egalitarian society where all citizens have equal rights, opportunities, and respect regardless of caste is made possible by empowered Dalit communities.

## **Internal reservation Dalits Karnataka**

The partitioning of the current Scheduled Castes (SCs) reservation quota into smaller sub-quotas for various SC communities is known as internal reservation for Dalits in Karnataka. The primary goal is to make sure that all Dalit groups, particularly those who have remained socially and educationally disadvantaged despite the general SC reservation, receive a more equitable share of the advantages of reservation.

A few highly advanced SC groups were discovered to obtain a greater proportion of government employment, educational opportunities, and welfare benefits while numerous underprivileged communities continued to be underrepresented, which led to the demand for internal reservations. The Karnataka government implemented sub-categorization under the SC quota after accepting expert committee suggestions to rectify this mismatch.

The policy seeks to advance inclusive growth, social fairness, and equal opportunity. Advocates contend that it lessens inequality among the Scheduled Castes and guarantees equitable representation for the most marginalized Dalit groups. Nonetheless, other organizations have criticized the action, arguing that it would worsen areas that have historically benefited from the reservation system or cause divides among Dalits.

In Karnataka, internal reservation is a crucial step in attaining balanced representation and guaranteeing that all Scheduled Caste groups get the constitutional advantages of affirmative action in accordance with their degree of disadvantage.

## **Political Representation of Dalits**

In order to guarantee equity, social justice, and inclusive government in India, Dalits must have political representation. Following independence, Dalits, who had previously experienced prejudice and marginalization as a result of the caste system, were given constitutional protections to ensure their involvement in politics. Scheduled Castes (SCs) are granted seats in the Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies, and local self-government organizations by the Constitution. Dalits are able to choose representatives who can speak out for them and defend their rights because to this reservation.

These constitutional provisions were established in large part because to the work of B. R. Ambedkar. Access to social programs, work, education, and legal protection from discrimination based on caste has all improved because to political participation. Additionally, it has fostered the rise of Dalit political parties and leaders that support social and economic justice.

Challenges are still present. Numerous Dalit leaders deal with ongoing societal prejudice, political pressure, and a lack of decision-making authority. Effective representation is further hampered by economic disparity and violence against Dalits. To make political representation more significant, democratic institutions must be strengthened, political awareness must be raised, independent leadership must be guaranteed, and laws prohibiting caste discrimination must be enforced. In general, India's democratic commitment to equality, dignity, and social inclusion for all residents is based on Dalit political representation.

**major present-day problems include:****1. Limited Political Representation**

- Although seats are reserved for Dalits in legislatures, many elected representatives have limited influence within their political parties.
- Leadership positions are still dominated by socially and economically powerful groups.

**2. Vote-Bank Politics**

- Political parties often seek Dalit votes during elections but may not consistently address their long-term concerns such as education, employment, healthcare, and social justice.

**3. Caste-Based Discrimination**

- In some areas, Dalits continue to experience discrimination and violence, which can discourage political participation and leadership.

**4. Economic Backwardness**

- Poverty, unemployment, and limited access to quality education reduce political awareness and the ability to participate effectively in politics.

**5. Underrepresentation in Decision-Making**

- Even where Dalits hold elected positions, they may have limited influence over important policy decisions due to party hierarchy or local power structures.

**6. Electoral Violence and Intimidation**

- In certain regions, Dalit voters and candidates may face threats, coercion, or violence during elections, affecting free and fair participation.

**7. Internal Divisions**

- The Dalit community consists of many different sub-castes with varying interests, making it difficult to present a unified political agenda.

**8. Implementation Gaps**

- Constitutional safeguards, reservation policies, and laws against caste discrimination are not always implemented effectively, reducing their intended impact.

**Conclusion**

Due to Constitutional protections, reservations, and the work of social reformers and political leaders, Dalits in Karnataka have significantly increased their political engagement. Despite voting, they still have to deal with issues including discrimination based on caste, unequal political representation, internal strife, economic disparity, and little influence in decision-making. Stronger social justice policy implementation, increased political participation, inclusive leadership, high-quality education, and economic possibilities are all necessary to address these problems. Only until Dalits can engage in politics with equality, dignity, and genuine representation will Karnataka be really democratic. A society that is more just, inclusive, and equitable will result from strengthening their involvement in governance.

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