Capturing and Decapturing Democracies: Notes from India

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Is democracy automatically restored if right-wing extremism is electorally reversed? What a southern state tells us about Modi's India as the world's biggest election plays out.

A TV news show in the southern Indian state of Karnataka kicked up a storm this month while covering the contentious topic of the rate of growth of Hindu and Muslim populations in India. The Asianet Suvarna News channel was reporting a recent study compiled by the economic advisory council to the prime minister that shows the share of the Hindu population in India has dipped since 1950 while that of Muslims has increased manifold. A graphic chart showing this data represented the Hindu population with an Indian flag and the Muslim population with a Pakistani flag, triggering the outrage.

A statistical misrepresentation mischievously timed with the ongoing election campaign, data points such as the one made in this government study are stock-in-trade for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's politics of Hindu supremacism, which thrives on fearmongering the supposed threats to the majority Hindus from Muslims, who constitute about 14% of the Indian population. His social media warriors and pet media outlets relentlessly megaphone this message and often use dog whistles equating Indian Muslims to Pakistanis and jihadis as a way of othering them by conveying their dangerous extraterritorial affinities to India's arch-enemy. This channel, owned by a Member of Parliament of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has evidently internalised this messaging as a truism.

Ever since Modi's rise to national power in 2014, much of Indian media, especially national-level news channels, have begun to act like his party's echo chamber. They amplify his achievements, hound his opponents, and spread hate against the country's minorities, especially its 200 million Muslims. Local media outlets in BJP-ruled states are equally

notorious for such distorted coverage, helping Hindu supremacist ideas to take root as part of a larger project of mass radicalisation of Hindus against the minorities. The [controversy](#) over Asianet Suvarna News shows that even media in states controlled by avowedly secular opposition parties are not impervious to it.

A nakedly biased and toxic media is both a symptom and a cause of India's rapid descent into illiberalism under Modi.[1] But the site of this egregious hateful broadcast is an Indian state where Modi's right-wing party is not in power. It was defeated in an election last May and the Congress party—which promises to free the country of the religious polarisation spreading under the BJP if it comes to power in the ongoing national election—snatched the reins of the state from the BJP. Incidents like these are a reminder that not a lot has changed despite the change in government.

The remarkable performance of the beleaguered Congress party in defeating the BJP's seemingly unbeatable election-winning machine disproved a lot of assumptions in contemporary Indian politics and raised hopes of a nationwide democratic revival. But as incidents like these show, electoral defeat of a totalising political power may be a necessary but hardly a sufficient condition for restoring full democracy. Especially when such power piggybacks the popularity of a leader whose charisma and ideology continue to dominate politics.

For civil society actors who pitched in to oust the BJP from power last year, there is much to despair about—from lax monitoring of [hate speech](#) to the absence of an administrative overhaul of the bureaucracy to cleanse it of Hindu supremacist influences—somewhat offsetting the hope generated by the enormity of the moment of triumph against the BJP. Still, the reversal has important lessons in democratically battling toxic ideologies. It showed the limits of populist appeal, breaking as it did the halo of invincibility that Modi has come to acquire. A year on, Karnataka shows the limits of electoral reversals in decapturing democracies.

Dramatic Reversal

With [17 public rallies](#) and five roadshows in a span of the last 10 days of campaigning, Modi went flat out to retain power in the Karnataka state election last year. Power that his party hadn't won in the first place but engineered with money. In the last state election in 2018, the BJP emerged as the single largest party in the state Assembly but failed to secure a majority. The Congress and a local party called Janata Dal Secular (JDS) formed a coalition government. But soon after Modi was re-elected as prime minister in the national elections in 2019, the BJP engineered defections from the Congress and the JDS. The state government collapsed and the BJP took power in 2020.

Karnataka holds a special place in Modi's calculus as it is the only southern state where the party has ever won power. Considered a primarily north Indian party for a long time, BJP

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[1] Follow the Money: The Economics of Media Capture in Backsliding Democracies, Debasish Roy Chowdhury, Policy Brief No 172, Toda Peace Institute

has been looking to Karnataka as the springboard to expand its fledgling footprint in the south. Coastal Karnataka, in particular, emerged as southern India's 'Hindutva laboratory.'

A melting pot of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, the region is home to historical tensions between different religious communities, allowing the BJP to capitalise on existing religious fault lines to consolidate the Hindu vote. The state election result in 2023 was thus a major blow to the party's pan-India ambitions, especially because it has tried everything in Karnataka to polarise the vote along religious lines and remake the state in the mould of the party's Hindu supremacist imagination of India.

The party backed agitations against the so-called "love jihad" (a conspiracy theory of Muslim men trapping Hindu women for religious conversion). It fuelled protests against Muslim women wearing veils in educational institutions, backed calls for an economic boycott of Muslims, and railroaded discriminatory laws against cow slaughter and religious conversion to target the Muslim and Christian minorities. It even raked up an 18th century local Muslim king's supposed atrocities against Hindus. Ditching his usual façade of secular statesmanship, Modi himself repeatedly resorted to Hindu chants and invoked Hindu gods in public rallies. But the party still ended up losing nearly 40 seats, winning less than half the number of seats that went to the Congress.

Apart from the role played by the civil society to highlight substantive issues to make voters see through the haze of polarisation engulfing Karnataka, other factors also greatly helped the Congress to take back power. One was the party's own welfare commitments, including promises of free electricity, 10kg (22lb) of rice per month to the poor, and schemes to help women heads of family and free bus travel for women. Popular disenchantment against corruption under the BJP also played a part. In an unprecedented move, the state's private contractors wrote to Modi complaining they had to pay kickbacks of 40% of project cost to ministers and officials. One contractor ended his own life, blaming in his suicide note a BJP minister for harassing him for bribe. The Congress campaign was immensely successful in amplifying this corruption in the BJP government. Price rises, youth unemployment, reports of unspent development money, delayed scholarships and unpaid salaries also weighed down the BJP.

The Sway of Hindutva

With its rich cultural heritage and a significant Hindu majority, Karnataka has been historically influenced by various streams of Hindu thought. The region has been home to several powerful ancient empires that contributed to the propagation of Hinduism. Socio-religious reform movements of the 19th and 20th centuries further entrenched Hindu values and traditions.

BJP and its allied Hindu supremacist organisations have successfully tapped into these deeply ingrained Hindu sensibilities and weaponised general voter resentments by framing Hindutva, or "Hinduness"—the BJP's ideology of establishing a firmly Hindu national identity replacing India's constitutional secularism—as a unifying force against perceived threats to Hindu culture and identity. The party adeptly used Hindutva ideology to mobilise

voters by engineering social polarisation through communal violence, misinformation, and hate speech targeting religious minorities.

The education system and media also played a significant role in disseminating Hindutva ideology. Textbooks and curriculum often promote Hindu-centric narratives, downplaying contributions from other religious and cultural traditions. Many media outlets propagate Hindutva agendas, framing civic issues in religious terms, perpetuating stereotypes about minorities and propagating hate and fear through their divisive reportage, like equating Indian Muslims to Pakistanis.

The BJP's hold over Karnataka can be traced back to the 1990s when it began making significant electoral gains on the back of a nationwide movement to build a temple at a site in northern India where a 16th century mosque once stood. In 2008, coastal Karnataka first witnessed a spate of attacks on Christian institutions and individuals by Hindu extremist groups. Churches were vandalised, religious gatherings disrupted, and Christian communities subjected to intimidation and violence. The BJP-led state government's failure to swiftly address the situation raised concerns about its complicity in whipping up anti-minority fervour.

In recent years. instances of cow vigilantism, mob lynchings and moral policing targeting inter-faith couples have been on the rise in coastal Karnataka, perpetrated by self-styled vigilante groups affiliated with the BJP and its ideological allies. Muslims and people from the erstwhile untouchable Dalits community have been disproportionately targeted under the pretext of cow protection, with incidents of lynching and violence occurring with alarming frequency. Radical Hindu groups in the state have tried to bar [Muslim traders](#) and campaigned against halal meat and loudspeakers in mosques.

The BJP government's reluctance to condemn such acts and its tendency to shield perpetrators not only emboldened Hindu extremists and fostered an atmosphere of fear and insecurity among minority communities, its incentivisation of extremist violence provided a career path in mainstream politics for the violent far right. The BJP, for example, offered a [cow vigilante,](#) said to be behind a 2005 lynching case, a ticket to run in the 2008 municipal elections. Fourteen years later, the man was back in the limelight leading the movement to stop Muslim students from wearing the hijab in educational institutions. This time, the party gave him another promotion by fielding him in the state election for legislators. He was among those who defied the trend that brought the Congress into office, winning his seat for the BJP with a [vote share](#) of nearly 60 percent.

The Pushback

Karnataka witnessed powerful religious reforms movements dating back to the 12th century, when a [Hindu seer](#) spread the message of caring for the vulnerable and the disadvantaged and rejecting the importance of temple worship and the social hierarchy based on caste and gender distinctions. This bedrock of tolerance and progressivism has had an important role in propelling Karnataka into modernity.

The country's [fourth richest](#) state and home to its information technology capital, "India's Silicon Valley," Bangalore, Karnataka is a magnet for domestic and global investments. The state alone accounts for 41% of India's info-tech exports thanks largely to Bangalore, which is home to more than [13,000 technology start-ups](#) and some 40% of India's 100-odd unicorns. Its rich history of educational strides, thanks to patronage of the region's royals and later, the work of Christian missionaries, paved the way for pioneering institutes that helped incubate Karnataka's evolution as a hub of technological progress. They also made the state, especially Bangalore—now rechristened Bengaluru, in accordance with the city's pre-colonial name—a melting pot of workers from across India, adding to the state's cosmopolitanism.

The BJP's campaign of divisiveness ran up against the state's naturally syncretic ways, making its civil society and intellectuals deeply uncomfortable, and increasingly, agitated. Shaken by the serial [murders](#) of journalist Gauri Lankesh and progressive Kannada thinkers like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M.M. Kalburgi by individuals connected to far right Hindu groups in earlier years, Karnataka's intellectuals have been particularly concerned about the institutionalisation of Hindu extremism.

Last August, faculty members of the famous Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore, the country's premier management institute whose alumni run major corporate houses not just in India but across the globe, issued an [appeal to corporate India](#) to "stop funding media content" that targets particular communities. In an open letter to corporate India, they called for curbs on hate speech, drawing attention to the "fragile state of internal security" and the "increasing risk of violent conflicts" within the country. The faculty members warned that the "rapidly increasing levels of radicalisation" among Indians was "fomenting an atmosphere conducive to large scale violence" exacerbated by a "glaring level of complacency" on the part of the government.

"Over the past few years, an open and public exhibition of hatred towards minorities in public discourse has become common practice in India: in political discourse, television news, as well as on social media…othering, dehumanising and demonising language while referring to minorities has reached alarming levels, and acts of violent hate crimes, often by organised and radicalised groups, against minorities have seen a rise," the faculty members warned.

In a rare public airing of political views by an industrialist, Kiran Majumdar Shaw, chairwoman and founder of leading biotechnology firm Biocon, took to X (erstwhile Twitter) to [warn](#) that the growing rift in society would destroy Karnataka's global image and leadership, and urged the BJP-backed chief minister of the state to "resolve this growing religious divide."

Civil Society

The biggest pushback came from Karnataka's civil society organisations, which eventually played a significant role in turning the tide against the BJP. The civil society resistance began to build up way back around December 2019, when Modi's federal government launched its push for a nationwide citizenship verification drive and a new law linking citizenship with religion, which were seen as discriminatory against Muslims. Like other parts of India, Karnataka witnessed spontaneous protests organised by civil society organisations that formed broad coalitions to counter the government. The ensuing pandemic and India's harsh lockdown, which triggered the flight of migrant workers across the country, brought on a renewed spate of social activism as non-profits took to the streets demanding better relief provisions for workers trapped in Karnataka and organised the same themselves.

The federal government's enactment of three farm laws that triggered a year-long protest at Delhi's borders also found echo in Karnataka. Aikya Horata, an umbrella coalition of the state's farmer groups, Dalit organisations and trade unions, launched a [movement](#) against the farm laws railroaded in the Parliament by Modi's federal government as well as the state government's move to remove curbs on non-farmers from buying agricultural land and allow private players to directly purchase agriculture produce from farmers.

In early 2022, when outfits allied with the BJP started an organised campaign to block Muslim students from entering their institutions in hijab, Bahutva Karnataka, a non-profit coalition of intellectuals and progressive groups pushed back, joining Islamic organisations and other groups to help students file complaints against the harassment. It also organised protests and harmony rallies with religious leaders from all faiths and launched social media campaigns highlighting Karnataka's inclusive traditions. In parallel, it issued a series of [report cards](#) on the government, evaluating its performance in key areas ranging from nutrition and education to women's rights and democracy. The reports, compiled by prominent academics and civil society members, highlighted the many failures of the BJP government, its damning findings spreading widely through social media.

The tussle between the state government and civil society organisations continued over a string of other issues, such as women's rights and rewriting of text books by the government, creating rainbow coalitions of disparate social segments and interest groups. Women's groups also organised major campaigns drawing attention specifically to instances of injustices to women. Protests against laws on religious conversions and cow slaughter, designed specifically to subject Christians and Muslims to vigilante violence and official repression, further galvanised civil society.

Another giant civil society collective, called Eddelu Karnataka (Wake Up Karnataka), emerged from these sustained movements. Led by prominent intellectuals and other civil society actors concerned about the Hindu supremacist push by the state government and the growing polarisation and hate in a historically pluralistic society, Eddelu, comprising about [6,000 volunteers from 102 organisations,](#) embarked on a major mass awareness program holding press meets, distributing pamphlets, and taking to the social media to spread its message seeking social harmony and democratic accountability.

Scrutinising the BJP's manifesto of 2018, it held the government to account on its promises on areas such as rural distress, inflation, subsidies, education and unemployment, and highlighted its role in spreading hate speech, among others, in a 30-page document titled "Wake up Karnataka: Citizens movement." It reached over 200,000 people through local assemblies as part of its mass contact program for the 2023 state election. Determined to prevent the BJP from returning to power, Eddelu even dissuaded 22 independent candidates from withdrawing their candidatures to reduce vote fragmentation. It also identified 70 constituencies where the BJP won by a margin of less than 1,000 votes in the 2018 election and sent its volunteers door to door explaining to voters why they should not vote for the BJP again.

Miles To Go

With all the work that the civil society organisations put in to turn the tide against the BJP, they naturally had high expectations of the new Congress government to undo the damage wreaked by the BJP and reinstate constitutional values. There has been some progress in this direction. In keeping with its manifesto, the new Congress government rolled back the controversial Protection of the Right to Freedom of Religion Act, 2022, or the anti-conversion law that provided jail terms and hefty fines for religious conversion and was being used by the BJP government to punish Muslim men in interfaith relationships. The new government also reversed the changes made to school textbooks that included lessons on Hindutva ideologues, among other things. To reinforce constitutionalism, it has been made mandatory for all educational institutions in the state to have their students read the Preamble to the Constitution every day. All government offices are now required to prominently display a copy of the Preamble. The general climate of fear that had developed for Muslims as a result of the administrative indulgence of Hindu vigilantes under the BJP has also been dispelled as a result of the change of government.

But the Congress government has shied away from repealing the cow slaughter law, as it had promised while in opposition, for fear of upsetting Hindu voters. It has also not withdrawn the cases registered under the law or compensated the Muslim cattle traders targeted by Hindu vigilantes and police under the law during BJP rule, and has not filed criminal cases against the vigilante groups, as demanded by civil society organisations.

The new government has also refrained from revoking the order banning hijab in government schools and colleges. In a letter to the Congress chief minister soon after he took power last year, a coalition of civil society organisations demanded an immediate withdrawal of the order issued by the previous BJP government that enabled the imposition of the hijab ban and said that they believed that since the Supreme Court failed to deliver a verdict on the issue as the bench was split on a decision, the state government had the discretionary powers to decide on the ban. But the new Congress government has not officially withdrawn the order.

For all the talk of corruption under BJP, most top bureaucrats in the previous government have retained their jobs. The police force, which faced allegations of colluding with Hindu

vigilantes when the BJP was in power, hasn't seen any changes in the top brass either, even though some senior officers have been transferred at lower levels.

Policing in Karnataka had become notoriously discriminatory towards Muslims under the BJP, pandering to moral policing and hate crimes by Hindu extremist groups. Civil society organisations had reported several patterns of communal clashes in coastal Karnataka, all triggered by Hindu extremist groups. These included their enforcing social segregation, dictating intimacies by attacking interfaith couples, organising economic boycott of Muslims, attacking Muslim cattle traders in the name of cow protection, and spreading hate speech. In multiple cases, moral policing by vigilantes led to murders of Muslim men. Police under the BJP not only refused to file complaints against hate speeches, they even withdrew hundreds of cases registered against people and groups instigating these campaigns. The port city of Mangalore, in particular, gained notoriety in its extent of religious polarisation, driven by extremist outfits like Bajrang Dal that spread terror among Muslims with impunity because of the police's indulgence of these lumpen foot soldiers of Hindutva.

The Congress in its election manifesto last year promised to ban the Bajrang Dal if it came to power. While this may have contributed in rallying the Muslim vote in its favour, it drew outrage from the Hindu right wing and Modi tried to turn it into a campaign device by vociferously defending the extremist outfit to rustle up Hindu vote. He failed, but even during the campaign it was evident that the Congress was wavering on its promise, with senior leaders saying there was no plan to ban the Bajrang Dal. Now one year into power, it has taken no action against the group.

But soon after regaining power, the new Congress government constituted an "Anti Communal Wing" to crack down on moral policing in Mangalore. This special wing was also tasked with investigating hate crimes committed earlier and monitoring organisations involved in hate crime and speech. In their first meeting with the top leadership of the Karnataka Police, the new chief minister and his deputy asked police to strictly refrain from moral policing, stop looking at criminal activity through the prism of religion, and treat people of all religions as equal. They made it clear that the new government would not tolerate the radicalisation of the police force that had taken place under the BJP, and also directed the police to act against provocative social media posts that spread hate and disturb social harmony. Despite these promising beginnings, the state police have not undergone the kind of structural cleansing that would be needed to detoxify policing. On many occasions in the past, it was the police that provided fodder for extremist violence by spinning theories of larger Islamist conspiracies even in gang-related murders or accidental deaths of Hindu vigilante members, adding to the climate of hatred towards Muslims. There is no clear roadmap on revisiting those cases to unravel the truth either.

Civil society organisations, including women's rights groups, have been urging the government to organise consultations to prepare the framework to restore secular policing in keeping with "constitutional morality" and order the police to "discontinue its practice of 'counselling' women fraternising with men of different communities."[2] They have also been

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[2] Joint appeal by the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Campaign Against Hate Speech, Bahutva Karnataka, and All India Central Council of Trade Unions to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah (mononymous) after taking office in May 2023.

pressing for a review of the training program of the police force "to inculcate attitudes of secularism and communal harmony in the police force."[3]

The spheres of news and social media, which have played an important role in spreading hate, are another area that required intense government attention to clean it up, but didn't get any. Civil Society organisations have demanded a government order to register suo motu police cases against hate speech on media, regular monitoring of hateful media content and prompt action against it. They had asked for a special task force to combat hate speech. A task force to monitor misinformation and hateful content was reportedly formed but there's no information on what exactly it has been doing since. Even the Pakistani flag on Asianet Suvarna News did not elicit a response from the task force.

The Long Shadow of Modi

Incidents like these are not entirely accidental. Much of the media in Karnataka is still aligned with the BJP, as the dominant political power nationally, and looming large over the Congress government in the state despite the landslide victory of the Congress in the state election. The hate-mongering may have stopped with the change of power in some media outlets in the state but the pro-BJP tone of mainstream media remains evident, with routine shows on Modi's statesmanship. Keeping the BJP onside makes solid financial sense since government and party advertisements are now among the most important revenue sources for any media house. Many media houses also pander to the BJP in return for favours in other areas of business that the company may be involved in. A recent court-dictated reveal of the list of donors and recipients in an anonymous campaign donation instrument called electoral bonds, for example, showed the second-biggest donor was a government contractor that also owns a media house known for its pro-government coverage. Also, like many institutions, the media in Karnataka still sees the BJP as a hegemonic power that isn't going anywhere anytime soon, no matter what local election results show.

India's first past the post system can sometimes exaggerate modest gains, with the loss or gain of seats not always in full consonance with actual vote share or voter mood. A careful analysis of last year's state election results would in fact show that despite the Congress's landslide victory, the BJP not only managed to maintain its 2018 vote share of 36% (the Congress's vote share rose 5 percentage points to 43%), it actually garnered 700,000 more votes than the previous election. In Bangalore city itself, the BJP polled 6% more votes.[4]

Despite its electoral loss, last year was in fact no exception to the BJP's steady rise of vote share from around 4% in 1989 to its present 36% in Karnataka as it continues to consolidate its social base. Discerning analysts point out that the Congress victory, powered by transactional swings of a section of the electorate in return for welfare promises and strategic voting by communities threatened by the BJP, does not have a sound social or

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[3] Appeal by the Campaign Against Hate Speech to the political secretary to the chief minister of Karnataka, 5/8/2023

[4] "Analysing the Congress's Victory in Karnataka After the Initial Hype," Shivasundar, The Wire, 1/7/2023

[political grounding](#), as opposed to the electoral preference of the more political and ideological BJP voter.

One reason for the Congress's reluctance to take organised Hindu extremism head-on might have been the approaching parliamentary elections. One could make a case for it to avoid combating Hindutva too aggressively lest it hand the BJP more polarising issues to rake up for the national election. But the Congress' tactical restraint also speaks to its constraints as Modi continues to dominate Indian politics and the overall political trend does not yet suggest a decline in the appeal of Hindutva among voters.

It also reflects the ideological wavering in sections of the Congress about its own stance on Hindutva, as in whether to ride the wave or resolutely stand in its way. The party often tries what in India media parlance is termed as "soft Hindutva," appearing eager to prove its Hindu mettle minus the hate for others. It has become increasingly common for Hindu leaders to showcase their piety with highly publicised temple visits in the manner of Modi's pointed exhibitionism of religious spectacles. This often plays out in the policy arena in ways that blurs the distinction between the BJP and the Congress. For example, when the BJP government in Karnataka in 2022 said it wanted to include the Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita in school syllabus, the Congress, rather than opposing the move, went out of its way to publicise how the party had in the past itself [popularised Hindu epics](#). This anxiety of the possibility of being seen as anti-Hindu if it combats the BJP's Hindutva politics, inhibits the opposition's ability to effectively counter India's drift towards authoritarianism under Modi. This speaks to the extent to which Modi has moved Indian politics to the right.

The 2024 parliamentary elections will offer important cues on the state of this rightward shift. Halfway through the campaign, there are signs of Modi fatigue among voters. But only the results will tell how substantive it is, if at all. A lot is riding on the opposition's success. The opposition parties have formed a grand coalition to unitedly fight the BJP. If they win, they promise to reverse the curbs on civil liberties and minority rights, restore the space for dissent, and decapture the democratic institutions emasculated and severely eroded in the Modi years. But going by the Karnataka example, it would be safe to temper all expectations even if the opposition manages to deliver Modi a shock defeat. Even if he loses, Modi or his ideology aren't going anywhere soon, and the rag-tag opposition might not have it in itself to rustle up the force of conviction needed in such decisive ideological battles.

The Author

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