

# Empowering Voices: The Role of Dalit Women in Karnataka's Political Arena

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## **Abstract:**

The inaugural election in Karnataka state took place on March 26, 1952, during the time when Karnataka was officially recognized as Mysore state prior to its renaming in 1973. Notably, the inception of the Mysore Representative Assembly dates back to 1881, initiated by Maharaja Chamaraja Wodeyar, establishing a precedent as the first of its kind in India. When delving into the political landscape of Karnataka, a predominant trend emerges from the period between 1952 and envisaged 2023, wherein the Chief Ministerial positions have predominantly been occupied by leaders hailing from dominant castes. Scrutinizing the data reflecting the extent of women's involvement in the legislative assembly unveils a disconcerting disparity, underscored by the presence of a deeply entrenched patriarchal system. Aligning with the global pursuit of gender parity and empowerment, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals place a significant emphasis on advancing women's rights, a mission that assumes critical relevance given the glaring gender gaps inherent in political representation in India, including the state of Karnataka. Despite concerted efforts to address gender inequities, a marked discrepancy persists between genders, further exacerbated by the varying degrees of political participation among women across different caste strata. The underlying causes fueling this divisive chasm warrant a closer examination, prompting questions surrounding the efficacy of constitutional reservations in augmenting the political agency of marginalized groups vis-à-vis the impact of prevailing leadership dynamics in shaping the political landscape. Delving deeper into the historical tapestry delineating the evolution of women's involvement in Karnataka's Legislative Assembly, a nuanced exploration of the contributions made by influential Dalit women politicians emerges as a pivotal area of focus. Shedding light on the pioneering role played by these trailblazing figures is instrumental not only in recognizing their individual legacies but also in extolling the collective impact they have had in fostering societal change and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. Notwithstanding the commendable strides made towards gender inclusivity, a notable absence of female legislators in the early years, notably the seminal period of 1952, underscores a poignant narrative underscoring the enduring challenges faced by women in the political realm. As we chart a course towards comprehensive understanding and analysis, unravelling the intricate dynamics shaping the participation levels and leadership capacities of both general caste and scheduled caste women in Karnataka's legislative machinery assumes paramount significance in delineating a more equitable and inclusive democratic framework.

**Keywords:** Dalit community, Dalit women, Political participation, Karnataka politics, Women participation, Assembly election

## INTRODUCTION

Dalit women in Karnataka have faced persistently low levels of political participation over the decades, with the period spanning from 1952 to 2023 serving as a testament to the enduring challenges they encounter. Embedded within a patriarchal system that often perpetuates traditional power dynamics and influenced by the intricacies of dominant caste politics, these women have found their avenues for engagement severely curtailed despite the presence of constitutional provisions aimed at their inclusion. While some semblance of representation does exist within the political landscape, it primarily manifests in the form of reserved constituencies designated for Dalits, a setup that, rather than nurturing authentic leadership, can sometimes result in mere proxy representation that fails to adequately capture the voices and aspirations of the Dalit women themselves. Consequently, the struggle for meaningful and impactful political agency for Dalit women in Karnataka appears to persist, an uphill battle that underscores the complex interplay between structural barriers, cultural norms, and the intricate dynamics of power within the state's political ecosystem.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In Karnataka, the Vachana movement provided a platform for girls, particularly those from lower castes, to actively engage in social life, offering a glimpse of empowerment beyond traditional constraints. While women's attempts to resist unethical practices are occasionally met with opposition, the seeds of change have undeniably been sown since the 19th century. The evolving social status of Indian women across generations can be attributed in part to the persistent struggles and legislative efforts championed by women. The legislative landscape in India underwent a significant transformation as gender discrimination was recognized and challenged, leading to the enactment of laws aimed at safeguarding women's rights and promoting gender equality. Despite these advancements, the Dalit Women's Struggle in India stands out as a unique chapter in history. Originating long before the industrial revolution, this movement predates the emergence of revolutionary ideas in Europe, setting a precedent for gender equality struggles worldwide.

The initiation of the Dalit Women's struggle was marked by the involvement of Western-educated Indian men and colonial sociologists intrigued by Indian society. These pioneers, driven by a desire to ameliorate the challenges faced by women, propelled the movement forward, paving the way for greater inclusivity and empowerment within the Dalit community. In essence, the journey of Dalit women in India encapsulates a narrative of resilience, determination, and a quest for social justice that continues to inspire generations to strive for a more equitable and inclusive society. Desai 2012: In their study, Desai and colleagues made a significant discovery that highlighted the transformative power of women's education in enhancing social mobility, improving health outcomes, and promoting family welfare. This positive impact, however, was found to be somewhat muted for rural women, who encounter a multitude of challenges including poverty, gender discrimination, and inadequate infrastructure. The researchers underscored the critical role that community support and government intervention play in mitigating these compounded disadvantages and fostering better outcomes for rural women. Sharma, Nandita 2012: Addressing the status of Dalit women in India, Sharma explored how Dalit women are actively challenging traditional norms of untouchability by refusing to engage in specific activities. One key strategy that has emerged is the deliberate rejection of certain practices that perpetuate discrimination. Moreover, in cases of violence, the leadership of the Dalit Mahila Samiti (DMS) employs a meticulous approach, carefully examining the different factors at play. Through open dialogues and discussions at cluster and regional

levels, the DMS community shares insights and experiences, thereby fostering solidarity and demonstrating collective support for victims within the broader context of the ongoing Women's struggle.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze Schedule caste factors in Karnataka Politics.
2. To know Dalit participation in Karnataka Legislative Assembly.
3. To know the role of Dalit leadership in the Karnataka politics history.

## DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS OF DALIT WOMEN AND KARNATAKA POLITICS 2023 - 2025

### a. 2023 Election Milestone:

The Siddaramaiah-led Congress government in Karnataka marked a turning point with the election of six women from scheduled castes (SC) in reserved constituencies during the state's historical electoral process. This event symbolized a notable stride towards improved representation and inclusivity, highlighting a pivotal yet modest breakthrough in the state's political landscape. The significance of this achievement cannot be overstated, as it not only signals progress towards gender equality and social empowerment but also reflects a growing acknowledgment of marginalized voices within the mainstream political discourse. Despite the relatively modest number, the selection of these six women underscores a growing commitment to diversity and meaningful participation in governance, offering hope for a more inclusive and equitable future for all members of society.

### b. Key Dalit Women Leaders:

In the political landscape of 2023, several prominent elected figures emerged across various regions. Among the notable individuals were Roopkala Shashidhar, representing KGF, Nayana Mottamma making her mark in Mudigere, and Manjula Limbavali standing out in Mahadevapura. Additionally, Bhagirathi Murulya was a key figure in Sullia, Latha Mallikarjun played a significant role in Harapanhalli, and Sharada Pooryanaik was known for her contributions to Shimoga Rural. These individuals brought unique perspectives and leadership qualities to their respective constituencies, driving positive change and progress. Their dedication to public service and commitment to addressing the needs of their communities earned them respect and support from constituents.

### c. Dynastic Influence:

In-depth examination of the 2023 elections revealed a noteworthy trend: a substantial number of victorious female candidates, especially those hailing from the Dalit community, were found to possess familial ties to well-known political figures. This observation sheds light on the continuing prevalence of dynastic politics as a predominant route for women to make their mark in the political sphere. It underscores the intricate web of relationships and influences that often shape political landscapes, indicating that the legacy of familial connections can significantly impact one's journey into the realm of governance. The interplay between established political lineages and emerging female leaders points to a nuanced dynamic within the electoral arena, blending tradition with a growing push for gender inclusivity and representation. This phenomenon prompts a deeper reflection on the complex power structures at play in the political domain, emphasizing the interconnected nature of family legacies and the trajectories of aspiring women leaders. It underscores the multifaceted nature of political success, where heritage and connections can often play as crucial a role as individual merit and capability. Consequently, the findings from the 2023 elections highlight the intricate dance between ancestry and ambition, demonstrating how

familial bonds continue to shape the pathways for women seeking to carve out their place in the ever-evolving landscape of governance.

**d. Rising Visibility:**

Despite facing various obstacles and societal barriers, Dalit women are steadily rising to the forefront of grassroots movements, showcasing remarkable determination and resilience. Notably, in the vibrant landscape of activism, groups like the Karnataka Mahila Dourjanya Virodhi Okkuta (KMDVO) are instrumental in empowering Dalit women, enabling them to voice their concerns, fight against injustices, and champion their fundamental rights. Through the collective efforts of these networks, Dalit women are forging pathways towards a more equitable society, dismantling systemic discrimination, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and empowerment. It is evident that their participation in such movements not only challenges existing power structures but also serves as a powerful catalyst for positive change, heralding a future where Dalit women stand as formidable agents of progress and equality.

**A MAJOR ANALYSIS OF 1952 TO 2023 KARNATAKA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION**

Out of 99 constituencies, the Indian National Congress Party achieved a remarkable victory by securing 74 seats. In the second position was the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party, which won 8 seats. The Samajwadi Party managed to win 3 seats, while the Scheduled Caste Union obtained 2 seats, and the Communist Party of India claimed 1 seat. Additionally, independent candidates succeeded in winning 11 seats. This outcome marked a significant triumph for the Congress in the inaugural election of Karnataka State, also known as Mysore State, leading to the formation of the first government. In the 1957 election, the number of seats increased to 208! Initially, in 1952, there were only 99 seats in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly. However, during the 1957 election, this figure surged to 208. Consequently, the Indian National Congress Party won 150 seats out of the 208 constituencies. The Congress party once again emerged victorious in the third election for the Karnataka assembly. Analyzing the election results of 1962, the Indian National Congress Party secured 138 seats. The Praja Samajwadi Party, which won 20 seats, took the second position. The Independent Party garnered 9 seats, the Maharashtra Integration Committee obtained 6, Lok Sevak Sangh won 4, the Communist Party of India claimed 3, the Samajwadi Party secured 1 seat, and independent candidates collectively won 27 seats.

The 1967 elections for the Karnataka Legislative Assembly marked a significant milestone. In 1952, the assembly had only 99 seats. However, during the 1957 elections, this number surged to 208. By the 1967 elections, it further increased to 216. Among the 216 constituencies, the Indian National Congress secured 126 seats, while the Praja Samajwadi Party, which came in second, won 20 seats. The Swatantra Party obtained 16 seats, the Samyukta Samajwadi Party garnered 6 seats, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh achieved 4 seats, and other parties collectively won 44 seats. The 1972 assembly election was a pivotal moment in Karnataka's electoral history. In this election, Congress-R won 165 seats, while Congress-O secured 24 seats. The Communist Party of India and the Samyukta Samajwadi Party each won 3 seats, with others winning in 21 constituencies. A total of 216 seats were contested in the 1972 Karnataka assembly elections, with Congress-R emerging as the largest party and forming the government by winning 165 seats. Most of the current Karnataka Legislative Assembly was established in 1978. The election format for the present 224 constituencies began in 1978, where the Indira Gandhi-led Congress-(I) won 149 seats. The Janata Party followed as the second-largest party with 59 seats, while the Communist Party of India and Congress-O won 3 and 2 seats, respectively. Other parties secured 11 seats in the 1978 elections. Since

India's independence in 1952, a Congress-led government was in place in Karnataka. However, in 1983, a party other than Congress formed the government for the first time, with the Janata Party emerging as the largest party by winning 95 seats, while Congress fell to second place with 82 seats.

Consequently, for the first time, the Janata Party, led by Ramakrishna Hegde, established a coalition government with the BJP, which secured 18 seats. Other parties were ranked at 29.19. After just two years, in 1985, Karnataka faced assembly elections once more. Ramakrishna Hegde's government was formed with a majority of 139 seats. Meanwhile, the Congress party experienced a decline, dropping to 65 seats, while the BJP, which had previously won 18 seats in 1983, managed to secure only 2 seats in 1985. Other parties won a total of 18 seats. This led to the formation of the government in Karnataka once again under the leadership of Ramakrishna Hegde. The Congress party, having lost power twice consecutively, achieved a significant victory in the 1989 elections, winning 178 seats. The Janata Dal secured 24 seats, while the BJP obtained 4 seats. Subsequently, the Janata Party won 2 seats, and the Karnataka State Farmers' Union also won 2 seats. Finally, other parties claimed 14 positions. Following this election, the Congress party struggled to perform well in Karnataka. The Congress lost power again in 1994, with the Janata Dal winning 115 seats in the elections. Conversely, the BJP, led by Yeddyurappa, won 40 seats. At that time, Congress was in third place with 34 seats, while the Karnataka Congress Party secured 10 seats. The remaining parties won a total of 25 positions. This marked a significant shift in Karnataka during the 1994 elections, representing the BJP's first major victory in the state. The Congress, having lost power, achieved another landslide victory in the 1999 Karnataka assembly elections, winning 132 out of 224 seats and establishing control in Karnataka. SM Krishna was appointed as the chief minister. Meanwhile, the BJP, led by Yeddyurappa, gained 4 additional seats, becoming the second-largest party with 44 seats. The Janata Dal-U won 18 seats, while the Janata Dal-S secured 10 seats. Other parties won in 20 locations. In 2004.

The BJP emerged as the largest party for the first time in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly elections in independent India. This marks the first occasion the BJP has secured such a victory in a South Indian state. Under Yeddyurappa's leadership, the BJP won 79 seats, while Congress obtained 65 seats and Janata Dal-S garnered 58 seats. The remaining parties settled for 22nd place. Nevertheless, a coalition government between Congress and JDS was formed. In the 2004 Karnataka assembly elections, the BJP, which had won 79 seats, increased its tally to 110 in 2008. Under Yeddyurappa's guidance, the BJP achieved a landslide victory and subsequently established the government in Karnataka. Congress managed to secure 80 seats but saw a drastic reduction to just 2 seats. Janata Dal-S ranked third with 28 seats. Notably, the number of independent candidates has decreased to only 6 seats in this election. The BJP, which won 79 seats in the 2004 Karnataka assembly elections, The BJP, which secured 79 seats in the 2004 Karnataka assembly elections, increased its total to 110 in 2008. Under Yeddyurappa's leadership, the BJP achieved a significant victory and subsequently formed the government in Karnataka. The Congress party obtained 80 seats but saw a drastic reduction to just 2 seats. Janata Dal-S ranked third with 28 seats. Notably, the number of independent candidates dropped to only 6 seats in this election. The BJP suffered a major defeat in 2013 after Yeddyurappa departed from the party, leading him to establish the KGP party during that election. Consequently, Congress won 122 seats and formed the government, while Janata Dal-S and BJP each secured 40 seats, with KGP finishing fourth with 9.8 percent of the votes. BSR was placed fourth, and other parties won in 12 constituencies. B.S. Yeddyurappa returned to the BJP during changing political circumstances, and at that time, the BJP emerged as the largest party with 104 seats. However, the government was initially formed under the leadership of Congress and JDS. Later that

same year, a BJP government was established, and B.S. Yeddyurappa became the Chief Minister. The elections for the 224 members of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly were held on May 10, 2023, with the results announced on May 13, 2023. This election recorded the highest voter turnout in Karnataka's history for Legislative Assembly elections at 73.19%. The Indian National Congress achieved a significant victory with 135 seats, marking its largest win in Karnataka since the 1989 elections in terms of both seats and vote share. Both the Bharatiya Janata Party and Janata Dal (Secular), who finished second and third, acknowledged their defeat.

## CHALLENGES AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS

### a. Low Representation:

Historically, the representation of women in the Karnataka assembly has been significantly low compared to their male counterparts, pointing to systemic barriers and challenges that hinder their participation in the political arena. This disparity is even more pronounced when considering the intersecting identities of caste and gender, particularly for Dalit women who face compounded obstacles that further marginalize them from positions of power and decision-making. The intersection of caste and gender discrimination creates a complex web of challenges that often restrict Dalit women from accessing opportunities for political leadership and representation. Consequently, the underrepresentation of Dalit women in the Karnataka assembly not only reflects a broader trend of exclusion but also highlights the urgent need for targeted efforts to address these entrenched inequalities and promote greater diversity and inclusion in the political landscape. By acknowledging and actively working to dismantle these intersecting barriers, there is a potential to foster a more representative and equitable democracy where all voices, regardless of caste or gender, can meaningfully contribute to shaping the future of Karnataka.

### b. Atrocities and Politics:

Dalit women, due to their vulnerable position in society, frequently find themselves singled out as targets amidst the political turbulence prevalent in the state. This unsettling trend was vividly exemplified in a noteworthy incident that unfolded in 2023 in Belagavi, where a Dalit woman fell victim to a brutal assault, sparking a significant and enduring political confrontation between the Congress and BJP. The assault on the Dalit woman not only highlighted the deep-rooted issues of caste discrimination and violence that continue to plague our society but also brought to the forefront the urgent need for stringent measures to safeguard the rights and dignity of marginalized communities. The intense and prolonged standoff that ensued between the two political factions served as a stark reminder of the inherent power dynamics and prevalent biases that often dictate the treatment meted out to disadvantaged groups. It underscored the crucial importance of promoting inclusivity, tolerance, and accountability within the political sphere to prevent such flagrant acts of injustice from recurring in the future. Ultimately, the incident in Belagavi serves as a poignant and cautionary tale, underscoring the ongoing struggles faced by Dalit women and the imperative for comprehensive societal reform to combat systemic discrimination and promote equality for all.

### c. Party Positionings:

The BJP has faced criticism for low ticket distribution to women (fewer than 3% in 2018). Conversely, parties often use safety issues and incidents involving Dalit women to leverage political gains, as seen in accusations between Congress and BJP.

### d. Economic Barriers:

The exorbitant expenses associated with political campaigns, coupled with the pervasive influence of "money and muscle power," pose formidable obstacles that impede the progress of women in the political arena. The financial demands of running for office, from advertising expenditures to campaign strategies, often place an undue burden on female candidates, limiting their ability to compete on a level playing field with their male counterparts. Additionally, the entrenched system of patronage and lobbying, fueled by wealth and connections, creates a power dynamic that disproportionately favors men, further constraining the advancement of women in politics. As a result, many talented and qualified women find themselves hitting a metaphorical glass ceiling, unable to ascend to higher leadership positions due to the barriers imposed by money-driven and male-dominated political landscapes. Despite strides towards gender equality, this issue underscores the continued challenges faced by women seeking to break through traditional power structures and enact positive change through political participation.

## MOVING FORWARD

### a. Preparation for 33% Quota:

In the year 2025, Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar emphasized the significance of preparation as he urged the Mahila Congress to gear up for the upcoming elections. He specifically highlighted the importance of anticipating the potential impact of the proposed 33% Women's Reservation Bill. Noteworthy is the fact that as many as 74 out of the total 224 constituencies are set to be reserved for women, marking a significant step towards gender inclusivity and empowerment in the political landscape. Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar's call serves as a pivotal moment for the Mahila Congress to strategize and mobilize their resources effectively in order to maximize the opportunities presented by this progressive legislative development. By acknowledging the forthcoming changes in the electoral landscape, the Mahila Congress aims to proactively position themselves to leverage the enhanced representation of women in positions of political leadership, thereby advocating for greater gender equality and diversity within the democratic framework. The Deputy Chief Minister's proactive approach underscores the broader societal shift towards acknowledging and addressing the historically marginalized status of women in political decision-making, paving the way for a more inclusive and representative governance structure that reflects the diversity and aspirations of all citizens.

### b. Policy Focus:

The Karnataka State Minorities Commission is a governmental body dedicated to safeguarding the rights and interests of minority groups within the state, with a particular emphasis on upholding the rights of individuals belonging to marginalized communities, such as Dalits and other underprivileged groups. This commission plays a crucial role in advocating for equal opportunities in education and employment for these minority groups, striving to eliminate discrimination and promote inclusivity across various sectors. By addressing issues related to unequal access to resources and opportunities, the commission aims to create a more equitable and just society where every individual, regardless of their background, can thrive and contribute meaningfully. Through its initiatives and programs, the Karnataka State Minorities Commission seeks to empower marginalized communities, amplify their voices, and ensure that their fundamental rights are respected and protected.

The Dalit Women's Struggle in India has been a long-standing battle for equality and recognition, tracing its roots back to the Bhakti movement when women first began to demand religious equality. Despite these initial strides, the deeply ingrained societal norms and caste system have continually hindered any substantial change in the status of women. Many girls have attempted to elevate themselves to the level

of divinity in the name of devotion, expressing a yearning for equality that transcends societal boundaries. The voices of women and their suffering have found echoes even among spiritual men, reflecting a growing awareness of the challenges faced by women in society.

## CONCLUSION

In the 2021-22 period, the country was ranked 132 out of 191 in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI). Furthermore, in the same report, it was positioned at 122 on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which includes factors such as the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women. India has experienced a decline in its ranking on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's global list of women in parliament, falling from 117 after the 2014 general election to 142 as of March 2023. Despite recent discussions and commendations of India as the "Mother of Democracy," one must question whether it is appropriate to regard the nation as the most populous, if not the foremost, democracy in the world, given the significant underrepresentation of female citizens in Parliament and state Legislative Assemblies.

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