

## Political 'Darshan' as Development in Karnataka

*From its position as a middle ranking state, Karnataka now competes to be emblematic of globalising India. The state's development trajectory is beset with many unaddressed tensions. The current dispensation in the state has discovered a new form of statecraft – political 'darshan' – in the form of instant development, mass counselling and public spiritualism.*

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Staying in villages in the homes of dalits, appearing in mosques, auditoria, temples and public grounds, the chief minister and his entourage of the BJP-JD coalition government in Karnataka have over the past year and a half crafted a new public sphere. An unusual and heady cultural politics of democracy and the democratised processes of cultural politics articulate in various terrains and contexts to produce a social and political matrix whose implications can now only be broadly gauged and no forecast made. Since the establishment of the coalition, by unanticipated dealings of cunning and connivance, the BJP-JD combine has sought to be stable and gain public legitimacy through various schemes and strategies. Over the months, the state has witnessed various spectacles in which instant development, mass counselling, and public spiritualism have become forms of statecraft.

### Mirage of Development

The most visible and populist of these have been the village stays ('gram vastavya') of the chief minister in remote and undeveloped regions, including a much publicised visit to Chamarajanagar district, considered a jinxed district that ensured loss of power to politicians who visited it. Supposedly, eating food cooked by dalits and spending a night in their homes, and promising to resolve problems of civic amenities and underdevelopment, the chief minister has crafted a publicity

campaign that has sought to represent himself and the coalition as pro-dalit and pro-development. But as critics have now levelled and as village after village testifies, the visits have been moments of instant development where roads are paved, drains cleaned, water tanks erected and houses painted overnight. But, the key issues of access to water, functioning schools and health centres and the persistent problems of agriculture and livelihoods remain unaddressed. Appearing in public meetings, holding daily 'darshans' to resolve the personal and social problems of the people, and announcing a range of populist programmes, the chief minister and the deputy chief minister have enabled the idea of 'darshan' as development to become legitimate in Karnataka.

Posturing as the "farmer-friendly government" ('raithara maithri sarkara'), the coalition has continuously developed and plied a range of packages from a loan moratorium to revamping irrigation schemes and is even claiming to promote new agriculture. As reports of suicides by farmers increased, including dramatic ones of collective suicides conducted in the vicinity of the district commissioner's office and at a hospital, the chief minister and his entourage held a public one-day counselling. With 10 farmers representing each district, the June 14 meeting held at the Bangalore University auditorium saw the chief minister, ministers and the various departmental secretaries become audience to the litanies of the farmers. Promising alleviation with a plethora of programmes including debt relief and a "no huts villages" policy, the chief

minister and then the leader of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha made public statements beseeching farmers not to commit suicide. Praising the people for their "science and knowledge", the chief minister chastised the bureaucrats and politicians who blocked the farmers' access to funds and development programmes. This public counselling came close on the heels of the government declaring the sale of both lotteries and country liquor (arrack) as illegal, both decisions supposedly to safeguard the interests of the poor, but backed by the new moral puritanism and policing that is spreading among the support groups of the Sangh parivar.

Far from its record of a state that has continued its key development programmes, the current dispensation deploys a clever rhetoric of rural and mass-based development and welfare over that of the previous government's Bangalore and IT-oriented growth. Yet, between the rhetoric and reality are trends that have heightened the forms of disarticulated development and a cultural politics in which issues of justice, equality and democracy are being given short shrift.

Very conscious of the 2004 election's key lesson: that of the loss of power when agricultural and rural issues are neglected, the current coalition has sought to publically question or distance itself from the IT and other Bangalore-based associations. Aligning itself with rural issues and programmes, the coalition government first publically challenged the hegemony of the IT industries but has over the months made covert concessions in the form of opening up land for development, facilitating sale of land, promoting special economic zones (SEZs), and initiating the establishment of the Greater Bangalore municipality ('Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike'). Added to this has been the auctioning of confiscated government land to private builders and agencies and the regularisation of illegal structures even as the master plan seeks to create an ordered and planned city. Barring a few analyses and voices that have been critical of such trends and their implications, there has been no substantial political mobilisation against the making of a greater

Bangalore in the image of global aspirations and pretensions. Stray slogans painted on walls such as Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI's) poster that exhort the people to "protest the destruction of Bangalore through the land mafia, the water crisis and vulgar films" are the only visible criticism. The state's alliances with big industries and its anti-labour positions have been visible in the fact that the now lucrative private mining industry, despite its environmentally damaging and dismal conditions for labour, continues to operate in the north Karnataka belt.

If the mirage of mass development is sought to be made by darshans, then the erosion of democratic structures and processes are the second strategy of ensuring a retrenchment of power for the coming years. Karnataka's pioneering and relatively well-functioning structures of panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) are now being challenged with a proposed legislation to curtail the financial and other powers of the elected district and village representatives and to pass these greater financial rights and allocation powers to legislators. A new outfit, the 'Panchayati Raj Hakkottaya Andolana' (Movement for Panchayati Raj Rights), consisting of members of panchayati federation members, individuals, some former MLAs and NGOs, has critiqued and questioned the erosion of the 73rd Amendment in the state and is gathering force to stall the passage of the bill. That such erosion has disrupted the contribution and support of such PRIs to development programmes and functioning of institutions has been evident in the stalling of the functioning of the School Development and Monitoring Committees (SDMCs), which, in turn, has led to problems at the level of government schools and their functioning.

### **Silent Saffronisation**

A silent saffronisation is taking place in the state with the growing presence and influence of the Sangh parivar members on issues related to public policy and programmes. Various programmes which the coalition government has either introduced or sought to introduce highlight this. At the level of schools, the government has succumbed to two different lobbies. One, the religious group that has insisted that eggs not be served as part of the mid-day meal in schools and that sex education not be introduced in high schools.

Matching this presence within the state are the growth and visibility of a large number of Hindu religious outfits whose reach and presence can be felt even in remote rural areas. Over the past year, several 'Hindu Rakshana Samitis' and 'vedikes' have held processions and meetings in rural areas exhorting people to take pride in Hindu dharma and become active in upholding its causes. Nothing can better represent the increasing communalisation of Karnataka than the situation in South Kanara; where riots and tensions over the past two years have fragmented a once integrated, multireligious society and in which comprehensive development and economic growth had taken place.

The growing presence of the Hindutva brigade was best exemplified in the conduct of a public 'yagna' in April at the Bangalore Palace grounds. Large hoardings with pictures of head swamis of the three key 'mutts' (representing the brahmin, vokkaliga and lingayat mutts) declared the yagna to be conducted for the "welfare of the public". Bringing together the spiritual leaders, the politicians and the film stars; all key players in the political theatre of the state, the yagna represented the distantiating of the political apparatus from the masses. While what transpired in the organisation and the participation of the yagna may manifest itself in the political, business and other alliances that these players make, it is the symbolic significance and the making of a larger public sphere in which acts and practices and symbols of a reinvented spiritualism that are gaining prominence. The links of such spiritualism to the rise of religious nationalism have been too well noted to be reiterated here, but for the state itself they mark if not the beginnings then the consolidation and the emergence of not just the spiritualists but of the mutt/religious organisation-backed political actors.

Representations and orientations of the emerging political actors indicate the contents of the new compositions. Recent hoardings (to celebrate birthdays, announce meetings, public rallies, etc) portray political players, both elected and those aspiring to be elected, as composite characters with elements of being politicians, film actors and business entrepreneurs. Pictures of heads of the mutts or religious leaders placed above them act as halos while smaller and numerous pictures of the supporters of the person are placed at the

bottom. Amidst the consolidation of a coalition that seeks to legitimise itself through darshans as development and its alliances with the leading industries, the mutts, and the dominant Hindutva brigade, is the consolidation of different types of political societies in Karnataka that draw on these trends. Caste associations, mutts, regional protection groups and fan clubs are the four key political societies that have emerged with voices and visibility. Caste associations, first initiated by the dominant castes and then followed by all the castes continue to be key political and social actors working at multiple levels of mobilising political support, participating in education institution-building and acting as civil society organisations.

Two dominant caste associations, that of the vokkaligas (Vishwa Vokkaligara Brigade) and the veerashaivas, have also gained global dimensions and seek to cater to their growing body of diaspora members who seem to be continuing their affiliation with them. Fan clubs range from the clubs for film actors (although the primary one; that of the spian the late Raj Kumar's, Raj Kumar Abhimanigala Sangha is now dormant), police officers (for Sangliana to Subash Barani), to those for politicians (e.g. for D K Shivakumar of the Congress). The region and language protection groups fall within the umbrella and aegis of the 'Karnataka Rakshana Vedike' (Save Karnataka Forum) and the Kannada Sena (Kannada army) that have sub-organisations such as the Karnataka Rakshana Vakkilara Vedike (Karnataka Protection Lawyers Forum). Espousing Kannada and Karnataka protectionism, these associations are visible in the periodic large-scale meetings they conduct, the campaigns they support and their visibility through flyers and bill-boards.

The Kannada and Karnataka Rakshana Vedike have championed regional issues such as the state's rights to Cauvery water (over the water tribunal's allocation to Tamil Nadu), promoting Kannada, and to a range of issues at the district levels. Emerging periodically to demand or support their "hero" and his visions or mourn his death as during the death of the actor Raj Kumar, the film, police and politician fan clubs represent the aspirations and orientations of a marginalised people. In a city that is globalising on a blueprint that has little or no place for the non-globalised worker and citizen, the aspirations of the

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**Six Fellowships** are available under the Institutional Doctoral Fellowships Scheme of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, amounting to Rs. 6000 per month for two years extendable in special cases to the third year. Scholars without NET will be eligible for a scholarship amount of Rs. 5000. A contingency grant of Rs 12,000 will also be paid. One salary-protected fellowship is available for a maximum of two years for an employed scholar of a university/research institute.

Applications are invited for these Doctoral Fellowships in the following disciplines: Economics, Political Science, Geography, History, Sociology/Social Anthropology, Development Studies, Women Studies, and Cultural Studies. Selected candidates will be admitted to the Doctoral Programme of the CSSSC to work under the supervision of a member of the faculty and will have to register for a PhD degree with a recognized university in India within six months of joining the programme.

Applicants should preferably be not more than 35 years of age on July 31, 2007. In the case of teachers from colleges, research institutes or universities, the upper age limit will be relaxed to 40 years. They should have a Post Graduate Degree from a recognized university in any of the Social Sciences or Humanities, with at least 55 per cent marks. In addition, applicants should have any one of the following qualifications:

- a. Passed the National Eligibility Test
- b. Successfully completed an M Phil Degree from a recognized University
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- d. Published two articles in reputed journals/edited books. Reprints must be submitted with the application.

The Doctoral Programme Committee reserves the right, under special circumstances, to relax these eligibility criteria.

The last date for the receipt of completed applications is **August 31, 2007**. Application forms may be downloaded from the CSSSC website ([www.cssscal.org](http://www.cssscal.org)). Applicants will be chosen on the basis of an interview to be held in Kolkata.

Completed applications may be sent to:

**The Administrative Officer**  
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences,  
R 1 Baishnabghata Patuli Township  
Kolkata 700 094

marginalised are directed towards laying claims on the ideal of the representative hero who belongs in culture and language to them but is on a higher plane in terms of class and power.

In the absence of inclusive and mass movements and critical and class-engaged political organisations, the likes of the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike and its variations are on the rise. The recent attack on an “inappropriately dressed” lady customer at a seven star bar is a testimony to where the anger and angst of the threats of globalisation lie. In the theatre of the political and mass culture of the state, four emblematic figures have taken centre stage; the IT entrepreneur (celebrated as the new hero representing success and the potential of being a global power), the Naxal (anti-state and people and therefore to be hunted down); the swami (the moral force in a time of unanticipated and un-understood change), and the fan (who seeks to uphold moral and cultural propriety as represented by a hero).

In their growth, presence, visibility and impact, the new political societies have eclipsed the formation and growth of any substantial political movement or party. The Alphasankhyakataru, Hindulidhavaru and Dalitaru (AHIND) movement forged from an alliance among the minorities, the backward classes and the dalits declared itself to becoming a political party, is yet to gain presence and prominence and its star leader, Siddlingaiah, has since joined the Congress I. The spread of the Maoists or Naxals in the western ghat regions is increasingly addressed through “encounters” in which youth and village residents have become targets.

Pressing issues related to agriculture, rural development, regional imbalances, resource management, poverty alleviation, etc, remain unaddressed even as populist programmes are periodically announced. Many of the development schemes are captured by traditional and established elites and the marginalised continue to join the ranks of the seasonal migrants and the displaced.

If religious-regional- and fan-led organisations envelop the middle and working class people, the upper class and the rich engage with and have led to the rise of the new-age spiritualists such as Ravi Shankar. In their presence and prominence in the English media and in the circuits of the nouveau-rich stress-management classes, country club stays and

spiritual sessions, new age spiritual leaders espouse and celebrate the new India and Indians who will combine the material wealth of the west and the spiritual strength of the east. Focusing on the individual’s inner needs, the new age spiritualists bring to the public discourse a negation of social and political orientation. Matching such spiritual inclinations and the rise of the political society of the masses is the establishment and increasing presence of the foundations set up by successful industries. Claiming to be working towards their corporate social responsibility and seeking to signal their engagement and contribution to the disadvantaged of India, these foundations are increasingly key players in the education, health, urban and planning sectors. Unlike corporate foundations in the US that act primarily as funding bodies, these foundations act as think tanks assuming knowledge and expertise of a new variety of subjects and domains of which they in reality are removed from.

## Society and Media

The fragmentation of the society is met with the fragmentation of the media and political organisations. Tabloids have mushroomed with exposes of political and sexual scams as lead themes and have now found dedicated readers among the large pool of new literates. As among other southern language television channels, there has been a mushrooming of Kannada television channels. From E-TV to the new Channel 9, viewers are enticed with a staple fare of family drama serials, song and dance and news. Sex, violence and lifestyle themes along with the promotion of the new globalised consumerism form the content and orientation of these programmes. *Crime Diary*, a popular crime investigation series, where victims and the culprits get their “15 minute of fame” has catapulted to gaining the highest ratings. Ravi Belegiri, who started the *Hai Bengaluru* tabloid and the popular *Crime Diary* television series has become a new cult figure with his own radio spot, *Ravi Belegiri at 8 am* in which he dispenses advice from the philosophy of life to career choices. These new heroes and cult figures have eclipsed Kannada literateurs, once the key voice and guides of public life and opinion.

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emblematic of globalising India, Karnataka’s development trajectory is beset with the unaddressed tension of an economy that is sought to be globalised and the realities of a large segment (region and population) that only lie in the shadow of the global. Karnataka now engulfs within it a Gujarat and a Bihar and all the dynamics that go into the two states. Data indicates an increase in foeticide and a declining sex ratio, a disembedding of rural economy which continues to register low growth rates, migration trends in which people from the predominantly drought-prone areas of north Karnataka continue to provide labour for the booming construction industries in the Bangalore and Mysore areas, and disarticulated development manifested in the skewed and contrasting life conditions of the people.

The metropolises are marked with a fragmented and highly skewed urban development pattern with gated communities of globalised elites living in enclaves of west imitating neighbourhoods and a large proportion of working and low-paid service class whose daily commute to the inner city is increasing. Many contestations and tensions lie in the subterrain of political manoeuvring and people’s response; the contests over land for SEZs, the imminent tension over sharing Cauvery waters with Tamil Nadu, the legislators’ claims over the PRIs, the establishment of bureaucratic-led municipalities, and the eclipsing of the rights of the rural and agrarian class by that of the urban and the globalised. Within all these are the increasingly distanced and fragmented relations of the very different types of people among whom ideas of resemblance and shared citizenship seem to be even more unlikely and estranged.

As a silent saffronisation spreads within the innards of the system, state disseminated publicity seeks to gain legitimacy on grounds of populist policies that defray and dissimulate any collective organisation against it. And ironically as the state celebrates 50 years of statehood, as Suvarna Karnataka or “golden Karnataka” through a number of public folk festivals, the life of its average citizen seems to be slipping down the scales. But in crafting legitimacy through darshan the state and its new public icons may have ushered in a new mode of development; that by darshan. **EPW**

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