

Caste, Class and Political Participation in Karnataka: A Case Study of Uttara Kannada District

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Abstract

Caste and class are important aspects in understanding political participation, representation, leadership, and access to political opportunity in India. Democracy guarantees political equality, social identity. Economic inequalities influence citizens' participation in political process. This study examines the relationship between caste, class, and political participation in Uttara Kannada district. It stresses on political awareness, electoral participation, local governance, political representation, and regional development priorities. The study adopted a case-study method supported by a questionnaire administered to 100 respondents. The data indicate that 78% of respondents believe caste impacts political participation and leadership to a great or some extent, while 90% agree or strongly agree that economic status affects participation in political activities. Furthermore, 70% never participating in local governance activities, and 70% believe disadvantaged communities do not have adequate opportunities for political representation. The findings highlight the importance of examining social identity alongside economic interests and institutional accessibility. The study concludes that inclusive political participation requires stronger local governance, effective representation, public awareness, and attention to regional development needs.

Keywords: Caste, Class, Participation, Representation, Social, Justice, Governance, Uttara Kannada, Karnataka.

Introduction

Democracy comprises more than elections. It includes political equality, public participation, representation of diverse social groups, and accountability in governance. In India, caste and class are important subjects of political science because they are influencing political mobilisation, leadership, access to resources, and citizens' relationships with political institutions. Caste is a social identity that may influence community networks, political mobilisation, candidate selection, and opinion of representation. Class is connected with income, occupation, education, employment, land ownership, and access to economic opportunities. Although caste and class are distinct concepts, they frequently connect in social and political life. Karnataka provides a scope for examining these relationships. Its

Published: 29 October 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i5.301398>

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political development has been shaped by various social movements, demands for representation, backward-class mobilisation, and electoral competition.

Uttara Kannada district is particularly relevant because it includes coastal habitations, agricultural regions, forest areas, and urban centres. Agriculture, fishing, trade, horticulture, tourism, industrial employment, and other occupations contribute to its varied socioeconomic structure. These differences influence citizens' political interests, access to elected representatives, and demands of government. The present study examines how caste and class connected to political participation in Uttara Kannada. It considers voting, political awareness, local governance, political representation, party orientation and opportunity in politics. By analysing questionnaire responses, the study helps to understand how respondents perceive the relationship between social identity, economic position, and democratic participation.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite constitutional guarantees of political equality, caste and class are influencing access to political power and participation in India. In Uttara Kannada district, social identity, economic status, education, occupation, gender, and party politics are shaping political awareness, representation, leadership, and governance. This study analyzes their relationship with democratic participation and developmental priorities.

Review of Literature

The relationship between caste, class, and politics has been widely studied in Indian social science. Srinivas (1952, 1955) explains caste organisation and the concept of dominant caste, highlighting the role of numerical strength, economic resources, and local influence. Deshpande (2001) discusses caste-related inequalities and their relationship with economic opportunities.

Madar and Basavaraja (2024) examine the interaction of caste, class, and ideology in Karnataka politics. Mohan's (2004) doctoral thesis on Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe voting behaviour in Chitradurga.

These studies establish a conceptual foundation for understanding political mobilisation, inequality, representation, and democratic participation. The present research article builds on this scholarship by examining these issues through questionnaire responses collected in Uttara Kannada district.

Research Gap

Existing studies examine caste mobilisation, class inequality, and political representation in India. However, limited district-specific analysis connects these factors in Uttara Kannada. This study investigates how caste identity and economic position relate to electoral participation, local governance, political representation, and access to public programmes across different regional contexts.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the relationship between caste, class, and political participation in Uttara Kannada district.
2. To examine the influence of education, occupation, income, and gender on political awareness, representation, and local leadership.
3. To suggest measures for promoting inclusive political participation, social justice, and democratic accountability.

Research Questions

1. How the caste and class influence political participation and representation in Uttara Kannada district.
2. How the education, occupation, income, and gender affect political awareness, local leadership, and engagement with political institutions.
3. How the livelihood concerns influence political demands and the participation of disadvantaged communities in local governance.

Theoretical Framework

1. Political sociology and caste

Political sociology analyses the relationship between social structures and political institutions. Caste is influencing community networks, political mobilisation, leadership development, and opinions of representation. However, caste should not be treated as the sole determinant of political behaviour. Party ideology, candidate reputation, development programmes, and governance performance is also influence citizens' political choices.

2. Class analysis and economic interests

Class analysis focuses on income, occupation, employment security, landholding, and access to economic resources. Different occupational groups may have different political priorities. Agricultural workers may be concerned with agricultural support, while fishing communities may prioritise livelihood security and market access. Workers, traders, and salaried employees may emphasise employment, infrastructure, and public services.

3. Democratic participation and representation

Democratic participation includes voting, attending public meetings, connected with elected representatives, participating in Gram Sabha meetings, and raising questions. These approaches provide a framework for analysing how caste, class, and institutional opportunities relate to political participation in Uttara Kannada District.

Research Methodology

1. Research design

The study adopts a descriptive case-study approach to analyzing caste, class, and political

participation in Uttara Kannada district. It combines questionnaire-based quantitative analysis with relevant secondary literature.

2. Study area

Uttara Kannada district in Karnataka is the geographical area of the study. It's varied coastal, agricultural, forest, and urban settings provide a useful context for examining socioeconomic differences and political participation.

3. Sample size

The questionnaire data for this study contains responses from 100 respondents. Their backgrounds vary in age, educational qualification, and occupation. The results are interpreted as descriptive findings from the surveyed respondents.

4. Data collection

The questionnaire contains 10 questions relating to Age, education, and occupation, the role of caste and economic status, Electoral participation and candidate choice, Participation in local governance, Political representation of disadvantaged communities, opportunity in politics and Party politics.

5. Sources of data

The primary data consists of the questionnaire responses. Secondary sources include books, research articles, doctoral research, official publications, election records, and government documents relevant to the topic.

6. Method of analysis

The responses are analysed using percentages. The findings are interpreted descriptively and related to the study's objectives and theoretical framework.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table-1
Age profile of respondents

S.No	Age Group	Percentage
1	18–25 years	26%
2	26–35 years	25%
3	36–45 years	40%
4	Above 45 years	9%

The largest group of respondents is aged 36–45 years, representing 40% of the sample. Respondents aged 18–35 together account for 51%. This distribution includes both younger adults and respondents with potentially longer experience of local political and governance processes.

Table-2

Educational qualifications

S.No	Qualification	Percentage
1	No formal education	6%
2	Primary or secondary education	25%
3	PUC	30%
4	Degree	30%
5	Postgraduate or above	9%

The data show that PUC and degree holders each account for 30% respondents. 6% respondents have no formal education, while 9% are postgraduate or higher qualifications. Education may be relevant to political awareness.

Table-3

Occupational background

S.No	Occupation	Percentage
1	Agriculture	40%
2	Fishing	8%
3	Daily-wage labour	10%
4	Business	30%
5	Government/private employment	7%

Agriculture is major occupation, accounting for 40% of respondents, followed by business at 30%. Fishing and daily-wage labour account for 8% and 10%, respectively. This occupational diversity provides a basis for examining the relationship between livelihood concerns and political priorities.

Table-4

Perceptions of caste and political participation

S.No	caste influences political participation	Percentage
1	To a great extent	58%
2	To some extent	20%
3	Very little	10%

4	Not at all	0%
5	Cannot say	12%

A combined 78% of respondents believe caste influences political participation and leadership either to a great extent or to some extent. 10% believe the influence is very limited, while 12% cannot express a definite opinion. These responses indicate that caste is perceived as a relevant factor in local political life by most surveyed respondents.

Table- 5

Economic status and political participation

S.No	Economic status influences political participation	Percentage
1	Strongly agree	80%
2	Agree	10%
3	Neutral	8%
4	Disagree	2%
5	Strongly disagree	0%

A total of 90% of respondents agree or strongly agree that economic status influences an individual's ability to participate in political activities. 8% remain neutral, while 2% disagree.

This is a prominent result in the survey. It suggests that respondents perceive economic resources as relevant to political participation. Financial resources, time, education, transport, and access to information may be possible mechanisms.

Table-6

Electoral Participation

S.No	Participating in Elections	Percentage
1	Always	46%
2	Often	25%
3	Sometimes	10%
4	Rarely	2%
5	Never/not eligible to vote	17%

Total 46% respondents are always participating in elections and 25% so often. Together, these categories account for 71%, 10% sometimes voting, while 2% rarely voting. The remaining 17% fall into the combined category of never voting or not being eligible.

Table-7

Factors influencing candidate choice

S.No	Factors influencing candidate choice	Percentage
1	Caste or community	10%
2	Economic and livelihood interests	20%
3	Party ideology	18%
4	Candidate's leadership and past performance	30%
5	Development programmes and public services	20%
6	Other	2

Candidate leadership and past performance are the most important factors influencing candidate choice, accounting for 30% of respondents. Economic and livelihood interests and development programmes each account for 20%, followed by party ideology at 18% and caste or community considerations at 10%.

These data suggest that respondents considering multiple factors when choosing a political candidate, including leadership, economic interests, development programmes, and party ideology. Although 78% of respondents perceive caste as an influential factor in political participation and leadership, only 10% identify caste or community as the most important factor influencing their candidate choice. These data are not necessarily contradictory, as the questions measure different aspects of political behaviour. While respondents may acknowledge the influence of caste in the broader political context, they may be less willing to identify it as the primary factor in their personal voting preferences. Social desirability bias may also influence responses, as respondents may prefer to emphasise leadership, development, and performance rather than caste-based considerations.

Table-8

Participation in local governance

S.No	Participation in local governance	Percentage
1	Regularly	10%
2	Occasionally	12%
3	Rarely	8%
4	Never	70%
5	Not applicable	0%

The most significant result in this category is that 70% of respondents never participating in local governance activities, such as Gram Sabha meeting. Only 10% participate regularly,

while 12% participate occasionally and 8% rarely. This data identifies a potential gap between electoral participation and participation in local decision-making.

Table-9
Opportunity in Election

S.No	Opportunity in Election	Percentage
1	Caste	46%
2	Religion	15%
3	Economically Strong	30%
4	Value	3%
5	Quality of the Leadership	6%

The data reveals that caste is considered the most influential factor in electoral opportunities, accounting for 46% of responses. This suggests that caste identity may play an important role in determining electoral prospects and access to political leadership in the study area. Economic strength ranks second at 30%, indicating that financial resources are also perceived as an important factor in electoral politics.

Religion accounts for 15% of responses, suggesting that religious identity may also influence electoral opportunities. Meanwhile, the quality of leadership accounts for 6%, and values account for only 3%. These findings indicate that respondents consider social identity and economic resources as more influential than leadership quality and personal values in shaping electoral opportunities.

The data suggest that caste and economic strength together account for 76% of responses, highlighting the importance of social identity and financial resources in electoral politics.

Table-10
Party Orientation to give opportunity in Politics

S.No	Party Orientation to give opportunity in Politics	Percentage
1	Caste	50%
2	Religion	10%
3	Economically Strong	31%
4	Value	0%
5	Quality of the Leadership	9%

The data show that caste is the most frequently identified factor in political parties' allocation of political contest or post, accounting for 50% of responses. The respondents believes that

caste considerations as highly influential in party decisions relating to political participation, candidate selection, and leadership opportunities.

Economic strength ranks second at 31%, indicating that respondents also believe financial strength as an important consideration in gaining political opportunities through political parties. Religion accounts for 10%, while the quality of leadership accounts for 9%. Notably, none of the respondents identified values as a factor, with this category receiving 0%.

The data suggest that respondents view caste and economic strength as the two major factors influencing political parties' decisions regarding political contest or post. Together, these factors account for 81% of responses. This is indicating a gap between the democratic principle of equal political opportunity and the practical considerations.

Discussion and Findings

This research paper examines the relationship between caste, economic status, electoral participation, political representation, and local governance based on questionnaire responses. The findings reveal that caste and economic status are important factors on political participation and access to political opportunities. At the same time, leadership performance, party ideology, livelihood interests, and development programmes also shape respondents' political preferences.

The study reveals that caste continues to be an important factor in local political life. About 78% of respondents believe that caste influences political participation and leadership to a great or some extent. Furthermore, 46% identify caste as the most influential factor in electoral opportunities, while 50% believe that caste influences political parties' allocation of political opportunities. These findings suggest that caste identity is perceived as significant in political mobilisation, candidate selection, and access to leadership. However, only 10% identify caste or community as the principal factor influencing their candidate choice. This difference indicates that the influence of caste in the broader political environment does not necessarily determine individual voting preferences.

Economic status emerges as another major factor influencing political participation. A total of 90% of respondents agree or strongly agree that economic status affects an individual's ability to participate in political activities. Similarly, 30% identify economic strength as an important factor influencing electoral opportunities, while 31% believe it affects political parties' allocation of opportunities. Together, caste and economic strength account for 76% of responses concerning electoral opportunities and 81% concerning political parties. These findings suggest that respondents social identity and financial resources as significant influences on access to political leadership. Economic resources may affect access to political information, transport, political networks, and public meetings.

Electoral participation is relatively frequent among the surveyed respondents. Approximately 46% respondents are always participating in elections, while 25% participate often, Another 10% participate sometimes, and 2% rarely participate. The remaining 17% fall into the combined category of never voting or not being eligible to vote. However, a substantial 70% respondent never participating in local governance activities, while only 10% participate

regularly, 12% occasionally, and 8% rarely. This contrast highlights a potential gap between electoral participation and involvement in local decision-making. It suggests the need to strengthen awareness of Gram Sabha meetings, encourage public participation, and improve communication between citizens and elected representatives.

Regarding candidate choice, leadership and past performance are the most frequently identified factors, accounting for 30% of responses. Economic and livelihood interests and development programmes and public services each account for 20%, while party ideology accounts for 18%. These findings indicate that respondents consider several factors when selecting candidates. Leadership performance appears particularly important, while livelihood concerns and public services also influence political preferences. Given the occupational diversity of the sample, these concerns may reflect the different interests of agricultural workers, fishing communities, businesspeople, and wage labourers.

The socioeconomic profile provides additional context for interpreting the findings. Respondents aged 36–45 years constitute the largest age group at 40%. Educationally, 30% have completed PUC and another 30% hold a degree. Agriculture accounts for 40% of respondents, followed by business at 30%, daily-wage labour at 10%, fishing at 8%, and government or private employment at 7%. These characteristics indicate that the sample includes respondents from varied educational and occupational backgrounds.

The study demonstrates that caste and economic status are significant influences on political participation and political opportunities in Uttara Kannada district. Nevertheless, leadership performance, development priorities, livelihood interests, and party ideology also shape political preferences. The difference between relatively frequent electoral participation and limited involvement in local governance is particularly noteworthy. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening grassroots participation, improving political awareness, and promoting equal opportunities for political representation.

Major Findings of the Study

- 1. Caste influences political participation:** A combined 78% of respondents believe that caste influences political participation and leadership to a great or some extent. This indicates that caste remains a significant factor in local political life.
- 2. Economic status is a major influence:** A total of 90% agree or strongly agree that economic status affects political participation. This is one of the most prominent findings of the study.
- 3. Electoral participation is relatively frequent:** Approximately 71% of respondents always or often participating in elections.
- 4. Local governance participation is limited:** About 70% respondent never participating in local governance activities. This indicates a substantial difference between electoral participation and engagement in local decision-making.

5. Leadership performance influences candidate choice: Candidate leadership and past performance are the most frequently identified factors in candidate selection, accounting for 30% of responses.

6. Development and livelihood concerns matter: Economic and livelihood interests account for 20% of candidate-choice responses, while development programmes and public services account for another 20%. These findings indicate the importance of material concerns and governance priorities in candidate preferences.

7. Caste is a major factor in electoral opportunities: Caste accounts for 46% of responses concerning opportunities in elections, followed by economic strength at 30%. Together, these factors account for 76% of responses.

8. Caste and economic strength influence party opportunities: Half of the respondents identify caste as a factor in political parties' allocation of opportunities, while 31% identify economic strength. Together, they account for 81% of responses.

9. Disadvantaged communities are face representation barriers: The 70% respondent believe that disadvantaged communities do not have adequate opportunities for political representation.

10. The sample reflects varied socioeconomic backgrounds: Respondents represent different age groups, educational qualifications, and occupations. Agriculture and business are the two largest occupational categories. These characteristics provide context for interpreting political attitudes.

11. Political participation has multiple dimensions: The results distinguish between views of caste influence, economic constraints, candidate choice, electoral participation, and involvement in local governance.

12. Inclusive governance requires greater attention: The findings point to the importance of political awareness, accessible local institutions, transparent political opportunities, effective representation, and responsiveness to citizens' livelihood and development concerns

Suggestions and Policy Implications

1. Promoting Fair Political Opportunities

Since 46% of respondents identify caste as a factor influencing electoral opportunities and 50% associate caste with the opportunities provided by political parties, political parties and relevant institutions should examine whether their candidate selection processes and political participation mechanisms provide equal opportunities to individuals from different social backgrounds. These findings highlight the importance of promoting fairness and inclusiveness in political representation, irrespective of caste or community affiliation.

2. Reducing Economic Barriers

Economic strength is identified by 30% of respondents in relation to electoral opportunities and 31% in relation to party orientation, while 90% believe economic status affects political

participation. Political education, accessible meetings, transparent procedures, and attention to practical barriers such as travel costs and work schedules may help broaden participation.

3. Strengthening Political Awareness

Awareness programmes should explain electoral rights, political party structures, local-government responsibilities, public consultation processes, and grievance-redressal mechanisms. Information should be accessible to people with different educational and occupational backgrounds.

4. Encouraging Local Governance Participation

Since 70% of respondents report never participating in local governance activities, such as Gram Sabha and public meetings, local institutions should improve public awareness and schedule meetings conveniently. They should encourage citizens to express concerns, participate in decision-making, and receive timely responses, thereby strengthening transparency and accountability in local governance.

5. Encouraging Issue-Based and Informed Candidate Choice

Since leadership and past performance are the most frequently cited factors in candidate choice, voter-awareness programmes should encourage citizens to evaluate candidates' public records, policy commitments, integrity, and responsiveness. Voters should also consider development programmes and livelihood issues to make informed decisions based on candidates' performance and policy priorities.

Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to 100 respondents, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings. Second, the data are based on respondents' opinions and views, which may not fully reflect their actual political behaviour. Third, the aggregate data do not reveal variations in responses by caste, income, gender, education, or occupation. Therefore, the study should be understood as a descriptive analysis of respondents' views rather than a comprehensive explanation of political behaviour.

Conclusion

Caste, economic status, and political participation are interconnected dimensions of democratic politics. The survey of respondents indicates that caste and economic strength are widely regarded as important factors influencing political opportunities. The findings also reveal that candidate choice involves multiple considerations. Leadership and past performance are the most frequently selected factors, followed by economic and livelihood interests, development programmes and public services, party ideology, and caste or community. The findings also indicate a possible gap between electoral participation and involvement in local decision-making processes. The study highlights the importance of examining political participation beyond voting by considering access to political opportunities, economic barriers, candidate selection criteria, and citizens' engagement in local governance institutions.

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