

Caste and Power: Social Hierarchies in Bidaraguppe

Abstract

This report examines the channels through which caste operates in the village of Bidaraguppe. The spatial organization of the village is based on the social hierarchy underlying the power structure reflecting the division of space according to caste. Land donations for public purposes serve as a way to reinforce social dominance, even as individual landholdings decline. The paper also explores the impact of peri-urbanization, driven by real estate development, on traditional livelihoods. The study shows how caste continues to shape access to resources and opportunities in the context of modernization. It calls for policies to address growing inequalities and explores the evolving dynamics of caste, land, and labor in rural and peri-urban settings.

1 Introduction

Bidaraguppe is a peri-urban village situated in the Anekal Taluka of Bangalore district, Karnataka. According to the Population Census of 2011, the village consists of 848 families, with a total population of 3,787 individuals. The village has 1,916 males, 1,871 females and children aged 0-6 years constitute 484 individuals. The village's average sex ratio is 977, which exceeds the Karnataka state average of 973. The child sex ratio in Bidaraguppe is 1017, surpassing the state average of 948, according to the 2011 Census. The literacy rate in Bidaraguppe is also higher than the state average. In 2011, the village had a literacy rate of 78.23%, compared to Karnataka's 75.36%. Male literacy in the village stood at 83.77%, while female literacy was recorded at 72.53% (Census India, 2021).

The village can be characterized with a range of socio-economic and institutional infrastructures, including an anganwadi, a government school, a panchayat office, and a panchayat library. It also has a Milk Cooperative Society, a self-help group (SHG), and a branch of a grameen bank, which collectively contribute to the village's local governance and economic activities. The presence of two lakes highlights the village's ecological landscape while the numerous temples reflect its cultural and religious significance within the region. The occupational structure of Bidaraguppe is mainly agrarian, with agriculture serving as the primary livelihood for the majority of its residents. The cultivation of staple crops such as ragi and of cash crops such as flat beans, bitter gourd, grapes, carrots, radish, and beetroot make up the core of the village's agricultural activities. Apart from agriculture, the village economy consists of non-agricultural occupations such as petty shopkeeping, construction work, domestic help, tailoring, and other informal labor activities, denoting a diverse base. The social structure of the village primarily encompasses *Vokkaligas* and *Reddis*, the dominant castes within the village. These communities hold compelling social and economic influence, mirroring their prominence at the state level. However, the village fails to reflect the state-level caste composition in its composition of the *Lingayat* community, which is notably scarce in the area. Adding to the dominant castes, there are also households from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), contributing to the village's diverse social fabric. Migrant communities from states such as Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Odisha have settled in Bidaraguppe, adding to its demographic and cultural diversity. A small number of upper-caste Brahmin households are also found in the village.

2 Background

Karnataka's caste dynamics is distinguished by the dominance of specific caste groups, the *Vokkaligas* and *Lingayats*. These communities have historically held crucial economic and

political power, often exercising control over agricultural land and local resources. The Vokkaligas' influence expands to both rural and urban regions, with well-known political leaders emerging from the Vokkaliga community (Patil, 2007). Dominant caste groups, particularly the Vokkaligas in the south and the Lingayats in the north and central regions, often control these fertile lands. Their ownership of large agricultural estates has offered them considerable economic power, which in turn is reflected in their political influence. This agrarian wealth helps these groups to finance political campaigns, indulge in community patronage, and wield substantial power in local and state governance(Government of Karnataka, 2022). The following section explores how caste operates in various channels.

3 Debate and Discussion

3.1 Spatial organization and territorial segmentation

Spatial organization and territorial segmentation of the Biddaraguppe village are highly influenced by the norms embedded in the caste system. The integration of socio-religious structures, particularly temples, into the physical layout of the village reflects and reinforces the hierarchical structure of caste. Within this layout, the dominant castes occupy higher positions in the social hierarchy, a phenomenon that is symbolically represented by the clustering of their houses around temples. These temples, regarded as sources of sanctity and sacredness, serve as key symbols of social and religious authority within the village. This religious influence shapes daily life in various ways. One example can be seen in the behavior of the village children. They avoid visiting the library, which is located opposite the most prominent temple, on the days when they consume meat. The temple's position as a center of social and religious power, along with the associated norms of purity and sanctity discourages children from entering the library on

those days. The location of the dominant caste households near these temples strengthens the social order, placing them at the top of the hierarchy.

This spatial arrangement not only shows the dominance of these groups, but also highlights the caste-bound norms that govern the community. Furthermore, proximity to the temples reinforces the practices of purity and pollution, associating the dominant castes with higher levels of ritual purity and social prestige. This spatial and symbolic association with religious spaces further perpetuates the inherent caste distinctions. It draws a clear boundary between the dominant and lower castes. Through this arrangement, the spatial and social segregation of the village is both maintained and legitimised, making the role of caste as an organizing force within the community.

3.2 Symbolic Power and Social Hierarchy

The dominant castes in the village safeguard the existing social hierarchy to control valuable resources and maintain their prestigious position within the community.. Upholding their prestige, however, is a contentious process as it perpetuates systems of exploitation while reinforcing their status within the socio-economic hierarchy.

Apart from indulging in conspicuous consumption, these groups engage in symbolic acts of expenditure. These include charitable donations or investments in public infrastructure which enable them to reaffirm their social power and influence. This fact is evident through three key historical events in the village. For instance, the *Chikkakere* lake that was once owned by *Gummi Reddy* over a century ago, stands as a crucial example. He donated the land for the construction

of the lake, which was intended to serve multiple purposes: providing agricultural irrigation for farmers, supporting local ecology, and offering recreational space for the village. Another account comes from an elderly woman of the Reddy caste itself, who mentioned that her father donated the land on which the government primary school and anganwadi were built. Similarly, an elderly man belonging to Vokkaliga caste recounted that his family had donated land for the establishment of a hospital in the village.

These acts of charity, performed by the dominant castes, not only led to the village's development but also reinforced the social capital of these families. Even generations later, these donations continue to uplift their prestige reestablishing their lasting influence in the village. There is also rivalry and competition between the two dominant castes in terms of charity.. There is also competition, to some extent, in building temples, which serves as an expression of dominance and caste solidarity in the village. For instance the Reddy community has managed to build more than ten Goddess *Yellama Devi* temples around the temple as opposed to many other temples and idols in the village that were established by the Vokkaligas. At a *Yellama Devi* temple on one of the streets, it was written that the temple belonged to the Reddy community of that area. While asking a woman near by the temple who happened to belong to the Reddy community, she mentioned that the entry into the temple by people belonging to other castes was allowed and not restricted.

3.3 Peri-Urbanization and Labor Market Shifts

The dominant castes' control over land indicates its sophisticated importance within the socio-economic framework of the village. For landlords, land serves as both a source of income and a symbol of economic and social dominance. In contrast, for daily wage workers,

land serves as a critical resource for subsistence, reflecting their deep dependence on agricultural livelihoods. Therefore, the decisions made by landowners regarding the utilization of their land become critical, shaping the economic dynamics of the village and having far-reaching consequences for the livelihoods of landless workers.

The onset of peri-urbanization has heightened these dynamics, as real-estate development transforms traditional land use and ownership patterns. Landowners, primarily from dominant castes, have increasingly capitalized on the rising demand for land by selling or leasing it for non-agricultural purposes. While these transactions create substantial wealth for the landlords, they also reduce the availability of agricultural land and displace local peasants who depend on farming for their livelihoods. This shift creates a ripple effect, forcing many farm workers to seek alternative employment in non-farm sectors. The economic vulnerability of landless workers is intensified in this transition. Without access to stable agricultural work, they are often forced to take up precarious, low-paying jobs in construction or other informal sectors associated with real-estate projects.

Migrant laborers, who form a significant portion of the workforce face added challenges. Hailing from states such as Odisha, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, these workers live on the periphery of the village, segregated both socially and spatially. Their settlements are often characterized by poor living conditions and limited access to basic amenities, establishing their marginalization within the community. While real estate developers benefit from the availability of cheap labor, local peasants face reduced opportunities for employment. This is worsened by a preference among landowners to hire external labor over local workers, whom they see as less compliant or cost-effective. Such practices deepen socio-economic disparities, turning the local workers against migrants in an increasingly competitive labor market. The symbolic and

economic power associated with land ownership favors dominant castes to shape the trajectory of peri-urban development. By deciding how land is repurposed—whether for residential projects, commercial spaces, or infrastructural developments—they continue to retain control over the socio-economic transformation of the village. These decisions often prioritize profitability than the well-being of vulnerable groups, further increasing inequalities.

3.4 Ritual Practices

The Vokkaligas own land the most in comparison to other castes which makes them prominent in cultivation of various crops. While visiting a farm belonging to a Gowda family, the a woman in the household mentioned that they worship the tools that aid their occupation. They perform this ritual during the *Habba* or the harvest time, a week after Diwali. They also worship the seedlings of the crops that are to be sown in the next season post the harvest. They make offerings in the form of a sweet that is made out of Raggi that was harvested. The *Naga* temples in Bidaraguppe hold a unique place in the village's ritual practices, serving as a space where people from all castes come together during festivals such as Ganesh Puja and Naga Panchami. These events temporarily transcend caste divisions, establishing a sense of collective identity rooted in shared cultural and religious traditions.

4 Conclusion

The socio-economic setting of Biddaraguppe village shows how deeply rooted is the caste system in terms of shaping spatial organization, land control, and hierarchical power structures. Dominant castes, through their control over land and socio-religious institutions like temples, continue to hold pronounced influence in both symbolic and material forms. Their ability to

leverage acts of charity, attached to land donations for public goods like schools, hospitals, and lakes, not only reinforces their status but also perpetuates systems of exploitation and inequality. These practices demonstrate how caste-based power dynamics are sustained through both historical legacy and contemporary socio-economic strategies.

The rapid peri-urbanization of Biddaraguppe further complicates this dynamic. The shift from agrarian livelihoods to non-farm activities, driven by real estate development, has interrupted traditional economic structures. While dominant castes profit from land transactions and infrastructure projects, landless peasants and migrant workers face increasing vulnerabilities. The socio-economic segregation of migrants at the village's periphery, along with declining wages and precarious living conditions, reflects the unequal distribution of benefits from this transformation. The reluctance of landowners to employ migrant workers in farming shows how caste and community boundaries continue to influence economic opportunities.

The persistence of caste not only shapes spatial and social organization but also affects the possibilities for social mobility and economic equity. The intersection of tradition and modernization in Biddaraguppe emphasizes the resilience of caste-based hierarchies even in the face of changing socio-economic landscapes. While real estate development brings opportunities for growth, it also amplifies inequalities, further marginalizing already disadvantaged groups. The case of Biddaraguppe thus provides critical insights into how caste remains a defining factor in rural and peri-urban governance, even as modern forces reshape the socio-economic landscape. Addressing these issues requires a refined understanding of both historical legacies

and contemporary developments, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies that challenge deep-seated hierarchies while encouraging sustainable development.

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