

**DISPARITIES AMONG CASTES WITHIN
THE BACKWARD CLASSES CATEGORY:
AN ANALYSIS OF KARNATAKA'S DOMINANT AND
MARGINALIZED OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES GROUPS**

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— ABSTRACT —

Karnataka's Backward Classes (Backward Classes) reservation framework encompasses communities with substantial differences in population, socio-economic conditions, educational attainment, and political representation. Drawing on available findings from the 2015 Socio-Economic and Educational Survey and subsequent reports and public accounts of the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes, this article examines disparities between dominant and marginalized Other Backward Classes communities and considers the case for sub-categorization and targeted welfare measures. It also identifies the administrative, political, and constitutional challenges involved in designing a more equitable reservation framework.

KEYWORDS: *Other Backward Classes sub-categorization, Karnataka caste census, creamy layer, reservation policy, dominant castes, social justice, Backward Classes.*

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Introduction

In Indian public policy, the term “Backward Classes” emerged as a means of addressing historical disadvantage among castes and communities that were not covered by the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) framework but nevertheless experienced social, educational, and economic backwardness. In Karnataka, this category has been administered as a broad reservation bloc since the 1970s, with divisions into Categories 1, 2A, 2B, 3A, and 3B. The communities within this bloc, however, differ considerably in population size, land ownership, urbanization, political representation, and educational opportunities. This heterogeneity raises a fundamental empirical and normative question for social policy: does a common reservation framework for “Backward Classes” effectively address varying degrees of disadvantage, or does it allow politically and numerically powerful subgroups to receive a disproportionate share of benefits intended for the most disadvantaged?

Following the disclosure of findings from the 2015 Socio-Economic and Educational Survey and subsequent political debate over their acceptance and use, this question has become particularly important in Karnataka. Although the complete survey report has not been publicly released, statements attributed to the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes and independent reporting provide an empirical basis for examining the internal structure of the State’s Backward Classes. This article therefore analyses disparities between dominant and marginalized Backward Classes communities using the available evidence.

Historical and Institutional Background

Karnataka has one of the longest institutional histories of Backward Class classification in India. The Chinnappa Reddy Commission (1990) revised the list and

contributed to the present broad category structure after the L. G. Havanur Commission (1975) operationalized Backward Class identification in the state using social, educational, and economic criteria. Section 11 of the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1995, provides for periodic revision of the Backward Classes list. The Commission, then headed by H. Kantharaj, conducted the Socio-Economic and Educational Survey in 2015 at a reported cost of approximately Rs. 165 crore, covering nearly 5.98 crore of the state's estimated 6.35 crore residents.

The survey remained unavailable to the public for more than a decade amid concerns that its findings could affect the perceived numerical and political standing of some communities. It was subsequently completed under Commission Chairman K. Jayaprakash Hegde, submitted to the government in February 2024, approved by the Cabinet in April 2025, and later followed by a decision to conduct a fresh survey in 2025. This sequence illustrates the political sensitivity surrounding data on intra-Backward Classes disparities. (Deccan Herald, 2025a, 2025f.)

Objectives of the Study

- To compare the population proportions of major Backward Class communities in Karnataka with those of religious minorities, Scheduled Tribes, and Scheduled Castes.
- To compare access to higher education and Composite Backwardness scores among marginalized and dominant communities within the Backward Classes category.
- To assess the extent to which intra-category disparities are captured or obscured by the existing category structure (1, 2A, 2B, 3A, and 3B).

- To identify the political and administrative obstacles that corrective measures, such as creamy-layer expansion and sub-categorization, must overcome.

Methodology (Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes, 1995; Deccan Herald, 2025a–2025f.)

This study adopts a descriptive research design based on secondary data. The principal sources are statements and reports of the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes, material presented in Cabinet briefings, and cross-verified investigative reporting on the 2015 Socio-Economic and Educational Survey published between 2024 and 2026. Because the complete survey report has not been released in the public domain, the figures used here should be treated as reported estimates rather than as an officially published dataset. The available figures are organized under three broad dimensions: demographic distribution, Composite Backwardness, and access to higher education and government employment.

Statistical Findings

Demographic Distribution of Major Communities

The population shares of major social groups in Karnataka, as reported from the 2015 survey, are presented in Table 1. According to the reported findings of the 2015 Socio-Economic and Educational Survey, The two politically influential groups, Lingayats and Vokkaligas, together account for about 21% of the state’s surveyed population, which is substantially below the higher population estimates traditionally cited by political and community sources, while Muslims and Scheduled Castes individually have larger population shares.

Table 1. Population share of major social groups, Karnataka Socio-Economic and Educational Survey, 2015 (as reported 2024–2025).

Community / Group	Estimated Popula- tion (lakh)	Share of State Population
Scheduled Castes (SC)	—	18.27%
Muslims	76.99	12.87%
Lingayat / Veerashaiva	66.35	11.09%
Vokkaliga	61.68	10.31%
Kuruba	43.72	7.31%
Brahmin	15.64	2.61%

Category-wise Population Concentration

Categories 3A (Vokkaliga, Balija, Kodava, and allied communities) and 3B (Lingayat, Christian, Bunt, and allied communities), both containing relatively dominant communities, together account for more than 1.54 crore people. In contrast, the proposed Category 1B, comprising 80 occupation-based communities such as Kuruba, Madivala, and Kumbara communities, reflects a substantially different socio-economic profile and was assigned a higher backwardness weighting in the Commission’s proposed reclassification.

Table 2. Category-wise population concentration under the Commission’s proposed reclassification.

Category	Representative Commu- nities	Population (lakh)
3A	Vokkaliga, Balija, Kodava and allied groups	72.99
3B	Lingayat, Christian, Bunt and allied groups	81.37
1B (proposed)	Kuruba, Madivala, Kumbara and 77 other communities	73.92 — 80 commu- nities

Composite Backwardness Scores

Small, occupation-based communities appear at the more disadvantaged end of the spectrum according to the Commission’s Composite Backwardness Index, which

combines social, educational, and economic indicators in a reported 3:2:1 ratio. By contrast, Lingayats, Vokkaligas, and Brahmins, which have contested aspects of the survey, score among the least backward groups on the reported economic indicators.

Table 3. Composite backwardness scores for selected communities, 2015 survey.

Community	Backwardness Score	Backwardness Tier
Uppara (salt-makers/construction workers)	134.88	Most Backward
Bestha (fishing community)	129.45	Most Backward
Kuruba (shepherds)	123.50	Most Backward
Agasa (washermen)	120.76	Most Backward
Kumbara (potters)	111.09	Most Backward
Jain, Lingayat-Veer-ashaiva, Vokkaliga, Bunt, Brahmin	Lowest recorded	Least Backward (economic)

Access to Higher Education

Differences are particularly visible in access to higher education. Reported participation rates are substantially higher among dominant communities than among several marginalized Backward Classes communities and many religious-minority groups.

Table 4. Reported access to higher education by community, 2015 survey.

Community	Access to Higher Education
Lingayat	15.7%
Vokkaliga	11.6%
Christian	2.3%

Muslim, Beda, Idiga, Vishwakarma, Golla	Reported as low
Kuruba, Bestha, Uppara, Agasa, Tigala	Reported as very low, alongside low access to Group A/B government jobs

Discussion

The data indicate three broad patterns. First, although dominant communities such as Lingayats and Vokkaligas constitute a numerical minority within the broader Backward Classes-plus-minority population, they have historically held substantial political representation; sixteen of Karnataka’s Chief Ministers have reportedly belonged to these two communities. This level of political representation is not proportionate to their combined population share. Second, communities with high Composite Backwardness scores—such as Uppara, Bestha, and Kuruba—report substantially lower access to higher education and government employment than communities such as Lingayats and Vokkaligas (Table 3 and Table 4), even though several are accommodated within adjacent or overlapping reservation categories. Third, the Commission’s recommendation to divide the existing Category 1 into 1A and 1B and to extend creamy-layer income criteria to all Backward Class categories (1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A, and 3B) indicates a concern that reservation benefits may be disproportionately accessed by relatively better-off groups within a broad category. (Government of India, 1992.)

This pattern is broadly consistent with the rationale underlying the Union Government’s Rohini Commission on Other Backward Classes sub-categorization, which examined the unequal distribution of reservation benefits among communities in the central Other Backward Classes list. The Karnataka evidence suggests a state-specific

form of the same structural problem: a broad reservation framework may not adequately distinguish between communities experiencing markedly different levels of disadvantage.

Key Challenges to Addressing Intra-Backward Classes Disparity

- Institutionalize regular and transparent socio-economic surveys, with clear statutory timelines and mandatory publication of anonymized, community-wise data, to facilitate independent research and reduce the scope for politically motivated data suppression.
- Adopt graded sub-categorization of the Backward Classes list based on multiple indicators of Composite Backwardness, as proposed in the 1A/1B framework, and review the classification at predetermined intervals.
- Apply creamy-layer income and asset criteria consistently across Backward Class categories to reduce the disproportionate capture of reservation benefits by relatively better-off households.
- Complement category-wide reservations with targeted measures such as hostels, scholarships, and coaching support, particularly for communities with the highest Composite Backwardness scores and the lowest access to higher education.
- Establish cross-party and cross-community mechanisms, including an independent statutory data-validation authority, to strengthen confidence in survey methodology and reduce politically motivated disputes over data.
- Ensure that any changes in reservation policy are designed in conformity with constitutional provisions

and binding judicial precedents, including applicable limits on total reservation.

The Karnataka experience demonstrates how a single, broad “Backward Classes” category can conceal substantial internal disparities between smaller, occupation-based communities that remain underrepresented in education and government employment and numerically and politically dominant communities. The evidence attributed to the Backward Classes Commission provides a basis for considering corrective measures, including sub-categorization and targeted support, despite the incomplete public release of the survey and the political controversy surrounding it. However, implementing such reforms would require sustained political commitment, transparent data governance, periodic review, and careful compliance with constitutional and judicial requirements. Without such measures, reservation benefits may continue to be distributed unevenly among communities that differ substantially in their levels of social, educational, and economic disadvantage.

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