

Karnataka's new Bill to criminalise social boycott — and why it goes beyond caste



Over the past decade, Karnataka has repeatedly seen families pushed out of village life — denied access to shops, temples, work, or even funerals — following decisions taken by informal caste or community bodies. The Karnataka Legislative Assembly has now moved to treat such practices not as “customary discipline” but as a criminal offence, by passing the Karnataka Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2025.

What the Karnataka Assembly has passed

The Bill, cleared by the Karnataka Legislative Assembly on December 18, criminalises the imposition of social boycott by caste panchayats, community bodies, or any group acting collectively. It prescribes imprisonment of up to three years and fines of up to ₹1 lakh for those found guilty.

In its statement of objects and reasons, the government links the law directly to constitutional values, arguing that social boycott violates the principles of dignity, equality, and fraternity. Existing legal provisions, it notes, have failed to curb the practice, especially when exclusion is enforced through informal community mechanisms.

How the law defines ‘social boycott’

Unlike earlier approaches that treated boycott as a social wrong, the Bill frames it squarely as a criminal offence. It defines social boycott as any oral or written act of social discrimination between members of a community that results in collective exclusion.

The scope is wide. It covers denial of employment or business opportunities, refusal of social or professional interaction, and restrictions on participation in religious, cultural, or community events. It also includes interference with

marriages and funerals, denial of access to schools, hospitals, burial grounds, or places of worship maintained by the community, and acts that sever social or economic ties.

Crucially, the law recognises that such exclusion often functions as collective punishment — not an isolated act by one individual, but a coordinated withdrawal of everyday life-support systems.

Why the Bill goes beyond caste

While caste panchayats remain a central focus, the Bill explicitly acknowledges that social exclusion today is not limited to caste identity alone. One clause recognises discrimination on grounds of “morality, social acceptance, political inclination, sexuality or any other basis”.

This brings within its ambit boycotts imposed for inter-caste or inter-faith relationships, political dissent, perceived moral transgressions, or non-conformity to community norms — including enforcement of dress codes, language use, or cultural behaviour. By doing so, the law attempts to respond to changing forms of informal social control in both rural and semi-urban settings.

Targeting collective decision-making, not just individuals

A defining feature of the Bill is its focus on how boycotts are enforced. Liability does not stop with the person who directly carries out exclusion. Anyone who incites, encourages, or influences others to impose a boycott can be prosecuted. Members of a caste or community body who vote in favour of a boycott are also deemed guilty.

The law even criminalises the process itself. Gatherings convened to deliberate on imposing a social boycott are treated as unlawful assemblies, punishable with fines. This is aimed squarely at dismantling the informal decision-making structures that lend legitimacy and force to social exclusion.

Why the law matters in Karnataka's recent context

The Bill follows a series of incidents across districts such as Chikkaballapur, Kolar, Bangarapet and parts of north Karnataka, where Dalit families and those involved in inter-caste relationships faced village-wide ostracism. In several cases, access to shops, temples, and public spaces was denied, with police action often coming only after sustained protest or media attention. While laws such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act address certain forms of economic and social boycott, they do not always capture exclusion imposed internally within communities or enforced through informal

bodies. The Karnataka law is framed as an attempt to close this gap between constitutional guarantees and social practice.

Penalties, police powers and new officers

The Bill allows for imprisonment of up to three years, fines, or both for imposing or facilitating a boycott. Amendments adopted during the Assembly debate empower the police to act *suo motu* — including removing barricades or opening gates used to enforce exclusion.

To support enforcement, the law provides for Social Boycott Prohibition Officers, of at least Group A rank, tasked with detecting offences, assisting victims, and supporting court proceedings. The offence is designated as cognisable, allowing police to register FIRs without prior court approval.

Concerns around enforcement and legal design

Critics have flagged several limitations. The definition of “community” largely restricts the law to discrimination within a group, potentially leaving some forms of exclusion outside its scope. Silent or informal boycotts — where a village simply stops engaging with a family without any declared decision — may be difficult to prove.

There are also procedural concerns. The Bill allows both police and magistrates to receive complaints, but past High Court rulings in Karnataka have insisted that certain social justice laws require a magistrate’s direction before police investigation. This tension could affect how effectively the law is implemented.

The decision to make offences compoundable has also drawn criticism, with fears that victims may be pressured into settlements within the same community structures that enforced the boycott.

How Karnataka’s law fits into the national picture

Karnataka’s Bill resembles Maharashtra’s 2016 social boycott law — the first of its kind in India. However, experience there shows that enforcement has been weak, with few cases reaching conviction. Karnataka’s challenge will lie not in the text of the law but in sustained implementation, police sensitivity, and judicial clarity.

At its core, the Bill marks a clear statement: community customs cannot override constitutional dignity. Whether it succeeds in changing behaviour on the ground will depend on how consistently the state is willing to confront informal power structures that have long operated beyond the reach of formal law.