The move to recognise Lingayats as a separate religion must be seen in a political and historical context

**Contested terrain**

The scholar M.M. Kalburgi, who was assassinated in 2015, took great pains to establish the separateness of Lingayat dharma from Hinduism. Denying such a separateness, other scholars like Chidananda Murthy have argued how the concept of *shunya* (nothingness) and the idea of the body in Lingayat theology derive, respectively, from the Upanishads and from older discussions of yoga. But using the latter as evidence for viewing Lingayat dharma as a sub-component of Hinduism would be anachronistic as those texts came to be viewed as “Hindu” texts many centuries later. Further, the creative transformation of borrowed notions needs independent attention.

Since its founding in the 12th century, Lingayat dharma spread across Karnataka and parts of Maharashtra and Telangana. Unfortunately, historical research on the efforts of the dozens of *mathas* in acquiring new converts to the Lingayat faith and, more generally, functioning as moral authorities in their regions has been scanty. The conversion (*linga deekshe*) of individuals into the Lingayat faith continues to happen in *mathas*, albeit with reduced frequency.

The Lingayats were recorded as a caste within the Hindu religion for the first time in the 1881 census done in Mysore state. Their request to be classified as a separate religion instead was turned down at the time the Indian Constitution was being finalised. The rationale: How can Shaivites not be Hindu? Still, the idea that Lingayat dharma was a distinct religion stayed alive in scholarly and public discussions.

In 2013, the All India Veerashaiva Mahasabha, the umbrella caste association founded in the early 20th century, had taken the old request to the Mannohman Singh government. The Ministry of Home Affairs turned it down noting that Lingayats were indeed Hindu. It is comical that the Ministry had based its decision on the views of 19th century British officials like C.P. Brown and Edgar Thurston!

At a large Lingayat rally in Bidar last July, when Chief Minister Siddaramaiah was asked to help recognise the Lingayat dharma as a separate religion, he offered to consider the request. Half a dozen massive rallies followed up on that demand in different parts of North Karnataka. Heads of several Lingayat *mathas* and a few prominent Lingayat politicians from the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) took the lead in mobilising the grassroots support.

Reflecting the changed nature of Lingayat mobilisation, the six-member Nagamohan Das committee, which was constituted three months ago, views Lingayats and those who believe in Basava’s philosophy as belonging to a separate religion. The latter criterion is an opening offered to Veerashaivas who are clubbed with Lingayats in official documents despite their theological differences with the latter. The Siddaramaiah government has now asked the Centre to endorse the committee’s view that Lingayats form a separate religion.

**Political considerations**

Termed “a dominant caste” in social science scholarship, the Lingayats are about 13% of the State’s population of nearly 6.5 crore. At present, 47 of the 224 MLAs are Lingayats. Electorally significant in about a hundred Assembly constituencies, the Lingayat community matters in elections.

In 2011, the then Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Karnataka declared Basava Jayanti as a State holiday. And, last year, the Congress government mandated that a portrait of Basava adorn the walls of all government offices.

After being solidly behind the Congress until the mid-1970s, the Lingayats moved towards the Janata Party when Chief Minister Devaraj Urs began to sideline the dominant castes within the party. After the JD(S) became the more successful inheritor of the Janata Party under the leadership of H.D. Deve Gowda, a Vokkaliga, they gravitated, in the late-1990s, towards the BJP under B.S. Yeddyurappa, a Lingayat.

During Mr. Yeddyurappa’s two years away from the BJP, after he formed a separate party, the Karnataka Janata Paksha, in 2012, the loss of Lingayat support badly hurt the BJP’s performance in several constituencies in the 2013 State Assembly elections.

Since the Lingayat support is decisive for the BJP’s electoral fortunes in Karnataka, the party’s alarm about the Lingayats pulling away from Hinduism is real. But thwarting their wish to be a separate religion is not an easy option for the BJP. While the party’s spin doctors work overtime to blame the Congress for “dividing Hindus”, Mr. Yeddyurappa, the BJP’s projected chief ministerial candidate, has offered to go along with whatever the All India Veerashaiva Mahasabha decides vis-à-vis the separate religion status for Lingayats. Indeed, he was among the signatories to the 2013 petition that the Centre had turned down.

A cultural episode too

With the recent consolidation of the Lingayat vote behind the BJP, the Congress as well as the JD(S) are keen to re-establish a support base among them. While the Siddaramaiah government’s support for recognising Lingayats as a separate religious group cannot be seen outside of that strategy, it cannot have come in the absence of an already existing wish for it among them. The Lingayat swamis, in fact, were quick to express gratitude to Mr. Siddaramaiah for honouring their request.

A minority religion status does mean financial gain for the Lingayat *mathas* which run dozens of higher education institutions. But this factor cannot fully explain their struggle. The speeches, articles and interviews of Lingayat swamis bespeak a genuine concern about not letting the distinctive Basava philosophy be submerged under “a sanatana Hindu dharma.” Concerns about how contemporary Lingayat culture has made space for casteism and other practices abhorrent to its founding philosophy are also seen. The present controversy asks the Lingayats to re-examine their relationship with their rich moral tradition. Media discussions have served us poorly by keeping the focus on political motives and electoral gain. The episode in question offers a precious moment for self-introspection too: what makes my community different? What lies behind the rituals at home? Why were my grandparents named that way?

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