

Lingayat leap of faith

The agitation seeking minority status for Lingayats is once again revealing the politics of bad faith that often characterises the construction of religious boundaries in India. The Lingayats want to distinguish themselves from Hinduism, and in particular Veerashaivism, and they want to be recognised as a religious minority. Such demands have been in existence since the late 19th century, but the exigencies of politics are now creating unprecedented momentum for this demand. Next month there will be a Lingayat convention to lend it more weight.

In legal terms, this is a script India is destined to play over and over: The Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and others have successively tried for minority status. In the case of Lingayats, the movement has a social base, and ironically for a sect which sought to transcend caste, a deep caste basis. It is not a demand that is going away easily.

In a liberal democracy, self-identification should be, as far as possible, the norm. People should be free to call themselves whatever they want, and they can dispute their identities freely in the public sphere. But in India this has become a thorny public matter for two reasons. First, the state distributes rights and privileges based on whether or not communities are minorities or not. The great drive towards minoritisation is propelled largely by the view that getting a minority tag allows a community greater autonomy over its educational institutions. The Jains, for example, who recently got minority status, were largely driven by this consideration (for the record, this columnist had opposed granting minority status to Jains, see 'Tyranny of identity by decree', Outlook, February 14, 2010). The absurdity of laws that allow differential freedoms when it comes to running educational institutions has created in-built incentives for such movements to arise, and there is no stopping them.

But the second and perhaps even more disturbing aspect of this drive towards minoritisation is what it does to religion itself. One of the challenges of thinking about the politics of naming religion in India is this. Both scholars, and proponents of these movements, often assume that in these cases there are clearly designated categories of communities, whose actions, forms of consciousness, social practices, beliefs, set them easily apart from others. There must be some objective theological truth of the matter in which Jains are different from Hindus, or Lingayats from Veerashaivas, or Brahmos from other Vedantins.

Of course, there are interesting and creative differences. But their identities have been fluid in relation to their own past. They have often been non-exclusive in that being in one community often did not preclude reverence for the other. The social overlaps between them have often been considerable, and even the innovations they made were often intelligible only in light of their relationship to a vast and complicated tradition.

Identity and difference are not straightforwardly objective facts. It is a prior belief in separateness that leads one to construct narratives that exaggerate points of difference.

But in the modern process of religious identity construction like the Lingayats, three moves are made that are conceptually dubious: Objectification, essentialism, and rigidification. Objectification is the idea that there is a single authoritative truth about a sect that can be objectively defined. What is odd about the Lingayat movement is not just that it tries to delineate what its own beliefs are; in the process it seeks to define the core of Hinduism and Veerashaivism itself so that it can be set apart. This is very tricky territory. And in its construction of its own virtues, it has to necessarily oversimplify other histories, not just its own. Essentialism is the idea that Hinduism or Veerashaivism will always be wedded to whatever that rotten core is from which you are trying to separate or the conceit that Lingayats will always be progressive. Claiming virtue through

essentialism is the core of these movements. And rigidification is the idea that creation of a new form of identity will bring strong forms of identification and political assertion.

One of the things that has not been publicly discussed as much is how difficult freedom of expression is in Karnataka even beyond the murders of [Gauri Lankesh](#) and M.M. Kalburgi. A large number of freedom of expression cases involve writing about Basavanna. Perhaps more than Shivaji or even Prophet Muhammad, Basavanna is fast becoming a figure impossible to write about imaginatively without having a book banned. The Supreme Court has upheld bans on award-winning novels about him. In a characteristic judicial abdication, the Supreme Court recently refused to pronounce on a ban on Basava Vachana Deepthi. It says something about the intensity and suffocating nature of this kind of politics that it consistently throws up challenges to freedom of artistic and scholarly expression. This cuts across party lines.

This is a form of rigidification in which demands for minority status assert their identity by creating solidarity around supposed and imagined slights to the religion. It is also an interesting question whether the state government's decision to have government offices carry a picture of Basavanna is consistent with demands for a secular politics, and will generate similar demands elsewhere. One can construct Basavanna as a secular or a regional figure. But this construction only shows that what practices get designated as religious or secular or as a minority is entirely a function of political power.

Like with the Jains, there is also a bit of bad faith in this demand. It is not a threatened or marginalised minority; the designation of minority status will not either change the theological issues, nor any of the social practices. They will not get separate personal laws. It is another question whether the proponents of a common civil code should first advocate the abolishing of Hindu law as a category altogether which gives people a compulsory legal identity as Hindu. This is a necessary condition of getting the state out of the business of legally naming identities.

What is at stake in this debate over granting minority status to Lingayats is not just an archaic legal question. It is also a move to construct identities in a way that is both constricted and rigid. It is also turning a great reformer, radical and egalitarian like Basavanna into a mere minoritarian secessionist.

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