

Separate Religion Tag for Lingayats? – A Critical Look

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The demand for the tag of a separate religion for the Lingayat sect, which was already there, got a fresh and unprecedented momentum thanks to the encouragement received from the honourable Chief Minister of Karnataka, Shri Siddaramaiah. Clearly it was a shrewd political move, not that of a statesman made in national or even state interest, but that of a clever politician with the mischievous intention of breaking Lingayat backing for the BJP and gaining greater support to the Congress from Lingayats. A clear instance of 'Divide and rule politics', as the eminent Kannada writer S L Byrappa aptly observed on this move. But it caught the imagination of politicians among Lingayats including some of the seers for they saw in it an opportunity of being recognised as a minority religion and of exploiting the advantages and preferential treatment given to religious minorities. Being a dominant caste in Karnataka, both in terms of land and power, Lingayats – at least a major part of them – cannot benefit from caste-based reservations. Hence the demand for the tag of a separate minority religion.

Of course, Lingayat leaders who have supported this demand, have tried to justify their stand on the basis of claiming that the Lingayat religion is different from Hinduism on several counts – that they worship One God, that their God is formless, that therefore they do not worship idols, that they don't have to go temples, that they don't believe in caste, and that they instead believe in social equality. What they forget is that not only these principles were already there in Hinduism, but they have also borrowed them heavily from Hinduism. Many of the Vachanakaras were well-versed in the Vedas and Upanishads, there being quotes from them in several Vachanas. Though of course the credit for putting many of the noble ideas from the Vedas and Upanishads into an easily understandable form in a language spoken by people goes to them, even here they were not alone. Dasas in Karnataka, Warkaris in Maharashtra and many more Bhakti saints all over India did the same job with equal distinction. All of them believed in One God, and and opposed caste and inequality, - from within the tradition of Hinduism. The idea of God being One first emanated from the *Rigveda*. There are several *Riks* in it which clearly and emphatically declare the Oneness of God, the famous one being '*Ekam sad vipraah bahudhaa vadanti*' ('The One is spoken of variously by the wise.')

(*Rigveda* I.164.46). In the Upanishads also, the God is not only but also formless, immanent as well as transcendental. The Gita has an exceptionally tolerant and liberal view on this. It gives the freedom to a devotee to worship God in any form he or she likes, and assures that worship goes to the One and same God (*Bhagavadgita* IV.11). The Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita do not require temples and do not teach temple worship.

Not only the saints of the Bhakti movement in the middle age but the ancient Vedic/Upanishadic Rishis also came from different caste origins, and hence the saying that one should not probe into the jati-origin of Rishis and saints. Caste system is not intrinsic to Hinduism, nor is it unique to Hinduism. It is there among the Ligayats themselves, and even among Muslims. The Gita is actually opposed to caste based on birth and to inequality based

on birth. (For details, see the 5th chapter in my *Handbook of Hinduism* which can be downloaded from my website – www.mvsnadkarni.com).

The emphasis on work is common to both the Gita and Vachanas, and so is the emphasis on sincere devotion or Bhakti. The Upanishads and the Gita do not recommend costly rituals and sacrifices as a path of spiritual advance; the Gita clearly looks down upon them. For common people, it recommends selfless work and bhakti as the means of spiritual advancement, which is inexpensive and within the reach of all including particularly the poor. There is also emphasis on *ahimsa*, *satyam* and *asteya* and other related moral values like charity and generosity as basic to Sanatana dharma, as is the case with Vachanas. **The most popular Japa among Lingayats, - Om Namah Shivaaya - is very much shared by other Hindus too. The Japa was popular even before Basavanna and other Vachanakaras wrote their Vachanas.** There is so much commonness between basic Hindu scriptures and Vachanas that it would be blindness to argue that they are different in inspiration and cause espoused. Much of the ideological justification of the separate tag of religion for Lingayats is based on ignorance of history and of the essential content of basic Hindu scriptures. May be, the *Manusmriti* advocated a strict observance of caste rules, but Smritis including *Manusmriti* never had the same status as the basic scriptures – the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita (regarded as the essence of the Upanishads), and the *Manusmriti* itself says that where there is a conflict between the Smritis and the Shruti (the basic scriptures), the latter shall prevail. Thus any support to birth-based caste in the *Manusmriti* is made invalid by the opposition to it in the Shruti.

Though the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita are regarded as basic or original scriptures of Hinduism, it is not necessary for Hindus to believe in them exclusively and deny others. There is so much liberalism in Hinduism that Hindus can adopt any other scriptures, since any good scripture is compatible with or even based ultimately on the most original universalist scriptures of the world – the Vedas and Upanishads. One can remain a Hindu even if he or she does not recite the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita, but follows other religious texts like the Vachanas since in any case they are based on the former ultimately whether one is conscious of it or not. There is no conflict between the moral and spiritual essentials of all religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Religions should be regarded as open and inclusive, not closed and exclusive. The demand for a separate tag of religion for Lingayats goes against the grain of spiritual and moral universalism and emphasises conflict and separateness. A separate identity is never denied within Hinduism. There have been numerous schools of thought and sects within Hinduism each with a distinct identity. It is a federation of faiths, acknowledging diversity within an overarching unity. Lingayats have always been and will remain an inseparable part of it.

Thus there is no ideological basis for the separate tag. If the justification is to exploit the preferential treatment given to minority religions, such a demand will weaken the justification for any such treatment to religious minorities and will inevitably lead to scrapping it altogether. This will mean injustice to real (as against artificial) minority communities which need such preferential treatment to come even with more advanced communities. The

Lingayat community cannot be considered as socially, economically or politically weak and deprived, though there may be a lot of poor people in it. But there are similar poor people among other communities too. The way to bring these poor people into the mainstream of the society and economy is not to stress their religious separateness and aggravate ethnic conflicts, but to help them in a non-communal and economic means which is consistent with the liberal spirit of modern times.

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