

Indian state recognizes 800-year-old tradition as a separate religion

Lingayat Dharma “started as a revolt and protest against Hindu orthodoxy,” said a leader in the movement advocating status as a minority faith.

by [Bhavya Dore](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue



Lingayat flags at a rally. Photo via [@Lingayatas/Twitter](#).

For decades, adherents of Lingayat Dharma, an 800-year-old tradition with some resemblance to Hinduism, have lobbied the Indian government to declare it separate from the dominant religion on the subcontinent.

Recently the Congress Party, which rules the state of Karnataka in which the Lingayats are most concentrated, granted them the status of a minority faith.

“The whole religion started as a revolt and protest against Hindu orthodoxy,” said S. M. Jamdar, general secretary of the Jagatik Lingayat Mahasabha, a group at the forefront of the movement for obtaining official status as a minority religion. “It rose

against everything that is Hindu. Therefore it is a separate religion.”

He said Lingayats across the state were “euphoric” about the new recognition, which came after months of rallies for separation that attracted thousands.

Lingayats are also hoping to extend their victory beyond Karnataka, which lies in the southern part of the country, to all of India. But success nationally is less certain and would require action by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which controls the most seats in India’s parliament and is aligned with Hindu nationalists.

Elections are slated for later this year in Karnataka, and some political analysts think granting the Lingayats minority religion status is an attempt by the Congress Party to woo the community back. After years of supporting the party, Lingayats recently have tended to vote with the BJP. Estimates put the Lingayats at between 10 percent and 17 percent of Karnataka’s population, or as many as 1 million people.

Official religious minority status—also extended to a subgroup of the Ligayats, the Veerashaiva Lingayats—will afford them greater benefits in Karnataka, just as it benefits members of other minority faiths—Muslims, Christians, and Jains.

Among those benefits: more freedom to run their schools and the ability to reserve half the seats in those schools for members of the community. It will also improve their access to scholarships.

Until 1871 Lingayats were counted as a separate religion in the census, but for the past several decades they have been counted as Hindus. These followers of the 12th-century philosopher and social reformer Basavanna do not see themselves as Hindus. Among other differences, they worship a single god, do not worship at temples, and reject the caste system.

“The idea that it is a separate religion has been around in intellectual circles for a very long time,” said Chandan Gowda, a sociology professor at Azim Premji University in Bengaluru, the state capital.

“There has always been a strong ideological sense of being separate from Hinduism,” he added, noting as well the pragmatic effects of minority religious status. “But the focus in the demand has been on their religious distinctiveness.”

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