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Commentary

Siddaramaiah Challenges BJP by Pleasing Lingayats and Veerashaivas



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KALABURAGI (GULBARGA), KARNATAKA, SEPTEMBER 24, 2017: A massive rally in Kalaburagi on Sunday demanding independent religion tag to Lingayatism. - PHOTO: ARUN KULKARNI - A massive rally in Kalaburagi on Sunday demanding independent religion tag to Lingayatism.

With elections to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly scheduled on May 12, 2018, the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government has endorsed a long-standing demand by the Lingayat community in the State. S. Rajendran, Karnataka Representative, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, points out that by placing the onus on the Union government, the Congress could stand to gain politically irrespective of whether the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Union government accepts the State government's recommendation on Lingayats and Veerashaiva-Lingayats.

Lingayats and Veerashaiva-Lingayats, a dominant community with a major presence in the northern districts of Karnataka, have been up with a big demand for several decades that they be considered as a separate religion away from Hinduism. The State government has little scope in meeting this demand and yet has sought to convey to the major community that an all-out effort will be made by the Congress party to classify it as a religious minority although this will bear fruits only if the Union government gives its concurrence.

The Chief Minister of Karnataka, Siddaramaiah, known for his penchant for a social and secular outlook apart from his anti-religious stance has deftly played a caste card to woo the Lingayat community ahead of the all-important legislative assembly elections in the State, scheduled for May 2018. The State government has followed all the requisite procedures to be adhered to in the process of submitting a recommendation to the Union government and the onus is now on the latter to take a decision which in either way is expected to work to the benefit of the Congress although it is difficult to say at this point of time whether the Lingayats will prefer to go with a Kuruba leader to which community Siddaramaiah belongs, in the elections to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly.

The Veerashaiva and the Lingayat community has always been considered to be a united community although differences have persisted between the Veerashaivas and the Lingayats in the matter of worship. By its act, the Congress party has sought to bring about discontent between the Veerashaivas and the Lingayats although plans are afoot to recommend both the communities to be granted the status of a religious minority. It had widely been stated for well over a year that Siddaramaiah was behind the move in the escalation of protests by the Lingayat community and this is now

very much evident with the government opting to push through with the recommendation.



Chief Minister of Karnataka, Siddaramaiah

In the present instance, it is obvious that Siddaramaiah is seeking to divide the Veerashaiva and the Lingayat communities and thus ensure that the vote bank of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and in particular that of the former Chief Minister, B.S. Yeddyurappa, is drastically reduced. It is an exercise that has been undertaken with an eye on the legislative assembly elections and obviously the matter will be relegated to the background once a new government takes charge in the State. The Veerashaivas and the Lingayats may have drawn considerable attention to their demand for the status of an independent religion but any tangible outcome is ruled out at the present juncture since it will be imperative for the Union government to follow a string of procedures even if it deems it fit to go ahead with the State's recommendation.

The Lingayat Mahasabha had set December 30, 2018, as the deadline to the Siddaramaiah-led government to forward a recommendation to the Union government for enabling the community to enjoy the status of an independent religion. At a convention of the Lingayat community held in Bengaluru, the ultimatum was served to the government to put forth its recommendation to the Centre although it has been pointed out by several legal experts that neither the State government nor the Centre can accord the status of a religion to any given community, more so, since it will be in violation of the Constitution. However, irrespective of the salient features of the Constitution which is obviously known to

the Lingayats too, they have been persistent with the demand for long and believe that the government can always find a way to meet their expectations.

For a comfortable victory in the Legislative Assembly elections in Karnataka, a political party which enjoys the support of the Lingayats and the Veerashaivas can comfortably romp home and this is what the Congress is now driving at, much to the chagrin of the BJP which believes it has the committed backing of the Lingayats. The Congress government of D. Devaraj Urs (a Kshatriya), the Janata Dal governments led by Ramakrishna Hegde (Brahmin) and the H.D. Deve Gowda (a Vokkaliga) had won by a big margin in 1972 , 1983 and 1994 as they enjoyed the support of all major communities. Incidentally, Siddaramaiah too led the Congress to a big victory in 2013 thanks to the support that he enjoyed from several caste formations primarily that of the Kuruba community to which he belongs.

Although the Lingayats and the Veerashaivas have been together under one umbrella—the All India Veerashaiva Mahasabha—in recent months there has been a divide, more so, after the Chief Minister spelled out the stand of the government that they should come together in their representation to the State government and it would only be thereafter that the recommendation can be forwarded to the Centre. The Lingayats have been clear-cut in their demand while the Veerashaivas have a different outlook.

It should be noted that the Lingayats are followers of the 12th century social reformer Basavanna and his *vachana* (verses) philosophy. Their beliefs, practices and faith are different. Veerashaivas worship Lord Shiva as mentioned in Hindu mythology. However, the Shiva that Basavanna referred to in his *vachanas* (verses) is not the Hindu god Shiva but the *ishtalinga* (formless God), which people of the community wear around their neck. The President of the State BJP, B.S. Yeddyurappa, and the former Chief Minister Jagadish Shettar are important political leaders from the Lingayat community.

On the contrary, Veerashaivas, considered a sub-sect of Lingayats and ardent followers of Lord Shiva are a powerful community. Veerashaivism has its roots in the Vedas and Agamas, and Veerashaivas do not worship any god other than Shiva. While Lingayats were demanding recognition as a separate religion and not be

identified as Hindus, Veerashaivas had opposed it on the ground that Veerashaivas and Lingayats are one and the same.

The BJP which had backed the Lingayat demand for a separate religion, independent of Hinduism, with some of its top leaders being signatories to a similar representation made to the Union government in 2012, is now opposed to the action taken by the State government. Interestingly, this petition is still pending before the Union government even as a fresh recommendation is enroute. The BJP believes that the demand has come to the fore thanks to some vested political interests and that it will die down in due course while the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is of the view that Hindus should remain united, obviously meaning that the Lingayat demand is out of consideration.

With the Congress party taking the lead in wooing the electorate based on caste considerations, all the other political parties are expected to follow suit. Thus, political parties in Karnataka are back to the age old game of playing with caste sentiments with the belief that they can woo the electorate in an effort to consolidate their vote banks. It is well known that the BJP and the Janata Dal (Secular) largely rely on caste support, although the move of the Congress party has come about as a surprise.

In the present scenario wherein literacy is touching new levels with every passing year and with the younger generation more into inter-caste marriages, it is highly unlikely whether a mere recommendation of the State Congress leaders or that of the government which the party runs will have any influence in swaying the Lingayat community in favour of the ruling party. Further, the State government can only recommend for such a status to any community and it is for the centre to take it forward which in the present context is unlikely.

The Lingayats and the Veerashaivas constitute nearly 19 per cent of the State's population.

The Lingayats and the Veerashaivas constitute nearly 19 per cent of the State's population and the community is spread across all regions of the State. Lingayat seers have a considerable influence over the members of the community and a large

number of the educational institutions including a number of them dedicated to higher learning are run by the community, more so, the Lingayat mutts.

The argument put forward by those seeking an independent status is that “Lingayat is an independent religion and cannot be perceived as a caste within the realm of Hinduism”. Efforts to get the community an independent religion status have been on for nearly a century and that this effort will continue. It is another matter that there are differences among the political and the spiritual leaders of the community in seeking an independent religion status.

In a way, the Congress is now making a bold attempt to invade into that territory and this may yield results although not to the extent of disturbing the caste equations in the present political scenario. A striking similarity to the present situation is the one which prevailed in 2013, when the Kurubas (another of the dominant communities in Karnataka) who are perceived to have been united in their support to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in the last legislative assembly elections.

S. Nijalingappa, was the first Lingayat Chief Minister of then Mysore State. After Kengal Hanumanthaiah, the Vokkaligas lost the chief ministerial position to Lingayats and had to wait for 38 years to reclaim the chair when in 1994, Deve Gowda, became the Chief Minister. Between 1956 and 1972, the State had four Lingayat Chief Ministers (S Nijalingappa, B. D. Jatti, S. R. Kanti, and Veerendra Patil) and credit goes to D. Devaraj Urs, a Kshatriya, who broke this domination in 1972.

Thereafter Karnataka was ruled by two Brahmin Chief Ministers in R. Gundu Rao and Hegde, followed by S.R. Bommai and Veerendra Patil. This was followed by H.D. Deve Gowda and subsequently by B.S. Yeddyurappa, Jagadish Shettar and Siddaramaiah. It should be noted that Chief Ministers from the Lingayat community have largely enjoyed total power and authority with a majority of the members of the Legislative Assembly being on their side after an election.

An analysis of past State elections indicates that the Vokkaligas have played second fiddle to the Lingayats given the fact that while the latter community is spread across all regions of the State, the former is basically in the southern districts—the old Mysore region. As has been seen in the last two decades, the Vokkaligas rally behind

the Janata Dal, more so, since a senior member of the community (Deve Gowda) is the founder of the JD (S) and it will be an exercise in vain for Siddaramaiah to break this grouping.

The differences between the Veerashaiva-Lingayats and the Lingayats have come in handy for Siddaramaiah to play in between and he has been successful thus far having convinced the leaders of the latter formation and seeking to convey to the former too that the government is keen on obtaining them the status of a religious minority. With their political and economic power, the Lingayats control the biggest vote bank in Karnataka, but with this new development wherein the State government itself speaks of two groups within the large community, the Veerashaivas and the Lingayats will stand to be a divided lot in the long run and consequently their clout will stand to be diminished.