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Subverting Reservations in Karnataka

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The unusual sight of Karnataka's influential swamis at the forefront of protests to tweak reservation quotas portends the end of reservations as a constitutional means for social justice, and a reassertion by the dominant castes.

The saints came marching in on Bengaluru, leading their faithful in vociferous demand for backwardness. The *padayatras* by two of Karnataka's influential castes, over several weeks from January to March, need not have attracted the attention they did were it not for the unusual sight of them being led by the *mathadisha*s, the chief abbotts, of two powerful monastic institutions of the respective communities.

These marches, to demand for the Panchamasali Lingayats and the Kurubas a more favourable share in reservations, were made even more of a spectacle by the accompanying politicians of the state's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Meanwhile, other castes also joined in this race to the capital, supplementing their physical presence on the highways with petitions and mass rallies at district headquarters, while announcing deadlines and satyagrahas, threatening fasts unto death, *urulu seves* (rolling on the ground as an act of piety), even suicide.

In every case, the mathadishas and their political allies spoke in the name of 'the people'. This amorphous term has come to mean anything: members of the sub-caste represented by the swamiji and to which the accompanying legislator belongs; broader constellations of castes such as Lingayats and Vokkaligas; or those who claim official categories such as Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. Only more rarely - and almost in a residual sense - has the term referred to constitutionally mandated rights-bearing subjects.

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Is Karnataka turning into the new 'madhouse' of caste? The current agitation has rightly called into question the actions of both mathadishas and ruling party MLAs and ministers who have shown no hesitation in appearing together publicly with their supplicants to raise very specific demands of the state. As deadlines are issued and new caste barriers erected, the BJP-led regime in Karnataka has already dropped ominous hints about the sheer 'ungovernability' of these irreconcilable demands for reservations. If the current agitations leave the state and the centre with no option but to completely transform reservations as we have known them, it will serve the purpose of restoring Lingayat and Vokkaliga dominance over state and society in Karnataka.

It will also reveal more starkly a sharing of sovereign power, between matha and state. What we are witnessing in Karnataka today is a sectarian-popular mobilisation which has blurred the lines between elected representatives and, for want of a better word, a sectarian religious leadership. The men in orange are gaining a new visibility in Karnataka, which is resetting the very meaning of sovereignty and representative democracy.

Unauthorised governments

Karnataka has an exceptionally old and complex network of mathas, monastic institutions supported by its dominant communities: Brahmins, Lingayats, and less commonly, Jains. By the late twentieth century, mathas also proliferated among other communities. While some Brahmin mathas - notably Sringeri - are older, Lingayat mathas have been in existence at least since the 15th century.

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The Lingayats are followers of distinct practices traced to the revolutionary Sharana movement led by Basava in the 12th century against Brahminical Hinduism. Over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Lingayat mathas grew both in numbers and in the range of their social and cultural engagements. The highly acclaimed Kannada literary historian and writer, M.M. Kalburgi, whose insurgent

scholarship led to his murder in 2015, described the function of the Lingayat matha in many Karnataka villages as *anadhikrita sarkara*, an unauthorised government. While tending to spiritual needs, the contemporary matha simultaneously rendered social services, including serving food, providing education, ensuring health, meting out justice, and promoting literature. Kalburgi's phrase signalled the more worldly pursuits of mathas which resulted from this broadened agenda: from running commercial establishments to cinema theatres.

Over the past 100 years, as mathas, especially Lingayat mathas, mushroomed, they acquired a new 'publicness' that has been a structuring force up to the present day. The matha itself became a sign of upward social mobility. Mathadishas showed no hesitation in appearing on public platforms and had power and influence over the emerging processes of representative democracy. S. Nijalingappa, chief minister of Karnataka during the 1950s and 1960s, in his autobiography described how the mathas 'directed' - or discouraged - votes and voters.



Saints go marching: Swamis marching in Bengaluru on 21 February demanding amendments to Karnataka's reservation scheme | Sharanabasappa

Yet at no time did the mathadishas seek to directly engage in politics or contest elections. This was in sharp contrast to their north Indian counterparts in the 19th and 20th centuries, who engaged in more public political action and did not hesitate to stand for elections to assemblies and parliament.

Today, we observe a move in the opposite direction. The mathas' assertiveness has taken a new form.

Subverting reservations

The most significant transformation in the last two decades has been the concerted effort by many caste groups, particularly dominant castes, to claim reservations as a new privilege. These demands have variously been made in the name of science, 'fact', sectarian research, historical sources, population size, and most important, in the name of a carefully unearthed 'underdevelopment' in educational and social fields. But in every case, they have appeared under the leadership of the mathadisha.

> By shifting the ground of reservations to disadvantage rather than active discrimination, does the current 'agitational complex' reveal a new face of democracy itself?

In the latest protests, the Kurubas, led by Niranjanandapuri Swamiji of the Kaginele Mahasamsthana Kanaka Guru Peetha, have argued their case not just based on economic and educational backwardness, but also low political representation especially in the lower echelons of the polity. The Panchamasalis, led by Basava Jayamrutyunjaya Swamiji of the Panchamasali Peetha in Bagalkot, too have

made similar claims. Others have highlighted the high proportion of a caste group living in rural rather than urban areas as the cause of their backwardness. Yet other groups await the research of their *kulashastris* on the historical roots of their backwardness. In some cases, there is indirect reference to the wounds inflicted on caste callings by capitalism itself. Thus, the work of Madivalas (as dhobis) has been overwhelmed by the mechanisation of washing; and hand quarrying by Bhovis is clearly no match for the new skills required by the rapacious industrial demand for granite and stone.

By emphasising a general index of backwardness, the basis of constitutional reservations as rooted in the long historical experience of social discrimination and of violent suppression by other castes has been effaced. By shifting the ground of reservations to disadvantage rather than active discrimination, does the current 'agitational complex' reveal a new face of democracy itself (as indeed did the 'AHINDA' alliance of minorities, backward castes, and Dalits forged together by the Congressman and former chief minister Siddaramaiah?) Or is it democracy's obverse?

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There has been a curious silence from the senior leadership of the BJP, a party which has in the past publicly opposed reservations. Despite occasional warnings that its members should not engage in such actions, no strenuous effort has been made by the party leadership to stifle, redirect, or control such participation. We are tempted to see the tacit approval of the state for such agitational tactics as fulfilling larger and more long-term projects and designs.

As Panditharadhya Shivacharya Swamiji of the Lingayat Sanehalli matha in Chitradurga rightly asked in the midst of nearly four months of full-throated agitations for reservations: "if all are backward, then who is forward?" It may indeed be as Siddaramaiah has repeatedly noted: that the BJP cannot directly oppose reservations, but by encouraging this war of all against all, has undermined reservations altogether.

Steps backwards

Since 1994, for purposes of reservations, Karnataka has subdivided its Other Backward Classes (OBC) into five categories based on relative backwardness, spanning the 'Relatively Backward' to the 'Most Backward'. In the current agitation, there are two hypervisible demands. The Panchamasalis, the largest Lingayat sub caste, want to be categorised as 'Relatively More Backward' class, which is allotted 15% out of the total 32% OBC reservation. (The Panchamasalis, currently slotted along with other Lingayats as 'Relatively Backward', are entitled to 5% reservation). The Kurubas, the third most important community, both in population and political importance, want to be reclassified as a Scheduled Tribe (with 3% reservation) from their present status as a Relatively More Backward class (with 15% reservations).

These demands have had their domino effects. Some OBC groups have demanded protection against forward castes trying to enter into the Relatively More Backward list. The dominant Vokkaligas (categorised as a 'Backward' class) have asked for an expansion of the quantum of reservations for their class, to 10% from the current 4%. The Upparas have demanded ST status. The Swamiji of the Valmiki Gurupeetha has asked for an overall increase of ST reservations to 7.5%. The Madigas of southern Karnataka and the Adi Jambavas - both Scheduled Castes - have demanded reservations within reservations as recommended by a committee in 2012. They argue that the bulk of SC reservations have been cornered by the Bhovis, Lambanis, and Holeyas.

On the surface, many commentators have been tempted to see these agitations as arising out of a need to settle political scores. Hence, the Kuruba struggle is to boost BJP's K.S. Eswarappa and end the hold on the community enjoyed by the Congress' Siddaramaiah. The Panchamasali demand has been seen as an attempt by BJP's Basanagouda Yatnal to unseat or at least to challenge the confidence with which B.S. Yeddyurappa has held on to his Chief Ministership, despite age and his jail term for corruption denting his public image.

In this new wave of agitations, the huge mobilisation of Lingayats in 2017, led by politicians from the then ruling Congress, demanding they be classified as a separate religion, has completely disappeared. What has appeared in its place are the twin forces of reservation demands that break the ranks of the Lingayats (the Panchamasali demand), as well as several measures and symbolic actions to suture an alliance between all warring factions of Lingayats. Chief Minister Yediyurappa's influential son, B.Y. Vijayendra has demanded the inclusion of all 112 subcastes of the Lingayats in the central OBC list, in order to claim a share in reservation nationally.

The mathas to the front

This extraordinary and seemingly contradictory struggle between and within castes has brought the mathadishas to the forefront and has made each caste and sub-caste stand for itself under their banners, rather than alongside the caste associations that had been active in the Kannada region since at least the 1920s. It is as if the distinction between ascriptive and achieved statuses has been completely dissolved.

> A new sharing of power is being forged between Swamiji and politician, though the former cannot as yet - for historical reasons - replace them.

The Lingayat mathas now collaborate with the state to give new meaning to the apportioning of state funds for sectarian development, pioneering a 'sectarian-popular'. The emerging equivalence between state and matha power resembles more closely Kalburgi's description of the matha as an unauthorised government. In a sense, they are reversing a century of inclusion - in education, jobs, politics - to actively collude with and abet exclusion. The emerging semiotic field suggests that a new sharing of power is being forged between swamiji and politician. The former cannot as yet - for historical reasons - replace the latter. (Innumerable photographs that feature the two always show the mathadisha at a slight physical elevation.) Nor have these powers been entirely fused.

Meanwhile, there is eager and unstinted state support for setting up 'caste corporations' with state funds, ostensibly, as the government told the Karnataka High Court, "to promote welfare for all, through focused micro-development initiatives." Thus far, Karnataka has 18 caste development boards/corporations/authorities, including for Brahmins and Lingayats. Not all of these were set up during the BJP's tenure, though the party has shown marked preference for favouring dominant castes (and their mathas), particularly Lingayats and Vokkaligas, in budgetary allotments and corporation founding, at the cost of allotments to OBC/SC/ST corporations.

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By describing the caste corporations as Special Purpose Vehicles, the Karnataka government gives a new meaning and weight to redistribution, consolidating the dominant caste hold that has been frayed at the edges by more democratic demands of the dominated castes over the last five decades. Are we then at the stage where interest and identity are fusing once more, as caste increasingly loses its links with occupation? We have already seen the BJP-led central government's skillful deployment of the category of Economically Weaker Sections to strike the first blow against reservations as a claim on the state by those who suffered centuries of discrimination. The Karnataka Brahmana Mahasabha's recent demand for extension of the 10% EWS reservation to state sectors only confirms this reading.

The new movements shift the discourse away from discrimination to 'economically weaker sections' and 'underdevelopment', though in the name of specific castes and sub-castes. In this sense, the fight for honours that raged between mathas in late 19th and early 20th century Karnataka, all arguing for higher self definition, and the new demand for consolidating a caste order in favour of those who have already established their dominance on the social, economic and political registers are not contradictory but two sides of the same coin.

The Karnataka government was by no means absentminded when declaring in court that "there are many individuals in every community who require the helping hand of the state." Calling these corporations special purpose vehicles only serves as techno-babble to mask an avowedly sectarian move that undermines ideas of equality and freedom as enshrined in terms like citizenship.

In this sense, Karnataka's matha-led agitations are both similar to and different from agitations by dominant caste elsewhere: Patels in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, and Marathas in Maharashtra respectively. In all cases, the demand for reservations speaks of internal differentiation, and the contradictions produced between the "social forwardness and economic backwardness" of these castes, as the sociologist Satish Deshpande has succinctly put it.

> The reservation demands of the Lingayats, moreover, are also an attempt to recoup political dominance in a state which had successfully enabled other caste contenders for political power.

But the Lingayats in particular demand a greater share of the government sector in jobs and education, *after* having exhausted the opportunities of the rural and, to some extent, the private sector. The Lingayats had long ago commuted some of their agrarian and caste capital into investment in higher education, dominating small trade, commerce, and industry, including the service industries. But more than a decade of jobless growth has undermined those advantages, especially among those who had not shared the rewards of India's economic liberalisation policies.

The reservation demands of the Lingayats, moreover, are also an attempt to recoup political dominance in a state which had successfully enabled other caste contenders for political power. At no point in Karnataka's recent past has there been a strengthening of the dominant caste's demands at the cost of a redistribution that was achieved first by Chief Minister Devaraj Urs in the 1970s and then by Siddaramaiah in the recent past.

Claiming icons

This unabashed shift towards strengthening dominant caste segments of the population (with the occasional gesture towards the lower caste segments) has been reinforced in the scramble to appropriate symbols and icons of Karnataka's rich and varied history.

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In January, full page ads in Kannada and English newspapers - featuring the prime minister and the chief minister - announced the ground-breaking ceremony for a new Anubhava Mantapa at Basavakalyan. The name recalled Basava's 12th century gathering of saints and philosophers. In the present though, the BJP regime has annexed the historic location of the revolution of Basava and the Sharanas to the project of uniting all Hindus under the banner of an enlightened religious order. In the government's blueprint, Basava's anti-casteness has morphed into an immersion in casteness.

Politicians, litterateurs, and even some mathadishas had immediately objected to this blatant subversion of the ideals of Basava, who had repudiated orthodox Hinduism. But a mouth-watering grant of Rs 500 crores for the development of the new Anubhava Mantapa, soon swamped and weakened such dissent. A sum of Rs 25 crores has also been allotted for commemorating the life of the Sharana poet Akka Mahadevi, Basava's contemporary. There has been enthusiastic state support of gigantic statues, including a 111-foot-tall statue of the very influential 111-year-old Siddaganga Swamiji of Tumkur district. Politicians, including Yediyurappa's son, have supported programmes of Lingayat mathas, such as the establishment of the Sharana Sene - a movement by the swamiji of the influential Murugha Matha of Chitradurga to 'return' to the basics of Lingayatism and away from the street agitations of other swamijis. In each instance, these are multiplying signs of this shared space of religious and state authority.

A petri-dish?

For now, the state government has played for time on the agitations for backwardness, by constituting a commission and by throwing the ball in the centre's court - directly by asking that states be allowed to expand their reservation quotas and indirectly by demanding the inclusion of certain groups in the central OBC list. The Supreme Court in May ruled against breaching the 50% cap in reservations, except in extraordinary circumstances, and took away from the states the power to identify backward classes. This has led to demands for Constitutional amendments to allow reservations over 50% and to restore the state's rights.

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The direction of these changes is unmistakable. We are moving towards the dissolution of reservations as we have known them: as policies towards the greater cause of social justice. And we are seeing an overt sharing of power between state and religious leaders. Both reassert dominant caste privileges at the cost of historically subordinated castes. Karnataka may well be the petri-dish in which a new experiment in recasting the meaning of 'public', 'constitutional right', and 'equality' is taking shape, with ominous portents for the future of democracy, freedom, and justice in India generally.