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**THE ROLE OF LINGAYAT ORGANIZATIONS AND  
CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL  
TRANSFORMATION OF KARNATAKA (2018–2026)**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This study examines the interplay between Lingayat organizations and civil society in Karnataka, focusing on their influence on social reform, electoral politics, and the demand for separate religious status. Rooted in the 12th-century Sharanas movement, Lingayatism has evolved from a reformist spiritual sect into a dominant socio-political force. Through a qualitative analysis of recent movements (2018–2025), including the Basava Culture Campaign, this paper argues that Lingayat Mathas function as “parallel civil society” institutions that bridge the gap between religious identity and secular governance.

**KEYWORDS:**

Lingayatism, Trivida Dasoha, Veerashaiva, Egalitarianism, Intermediary Institutions.

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## Introduction

The socio-political landscape of Karnataka is deeply shaped by the historical and contemporary influence of the Lingayat community, whose philosophical foundations can be traced to the 12th-century reform movement initiated by Basavanna. Emerging as a radical critique of Brahmanical hierarchy, Lingayat thought articulated an egalitarian social vision grounded in ethical labor (Kayaka), collective redistribution (Dasoha), and a direct, personal relationship between the individual and the divine. Unlike orthodox religious traditions embedded within ritual hierarchy, Lingayatism sought to democratize spiritual authority and social participation.

In the 21st century, the community-comprising approximately 17% of Karnataka's population-has leveraged its institutional strength through Mathas (monasteries) to influence state policy and social discourse (Patil, 2024). Its influence extends beyond electoral politics into educational institutions, religious organizations, and civic networks led by influential Mathas (monastic institutions). Between 2018 and 2026, this institutional ecosystem increasingly functioned as a form of organized civil society, mediating relations between state power, community identity, and democratic mobilization. Rather than merely acting as religious centers, Lingayat organizations have emerged as socio-political actors capable of shaping policy discourse, negotiating identity claims, and influencing electoral alignments. This period therefore offers a crucial lens through which to examine the intersection of religion, caste transformation, and civil society activism in regional politics.

### Objectives:

1. To analyze the evolution of the demand for minority status (separate from Hinduism) and its consequences for the 2018 and 2023 Karnataka Assembly elections.
2. To understand how the provision of education, healthcare, and food by Lingayat organizations shapes community loyalty and political bargaining power.

### 2. Historical Context: From Reform Movement to Institutionalized Social Power

Understanding the contemporary political role of Lingayat organizations requires situating them within a longer historical trajectory

that reflects the transformation from a reformist spiritual movement into what sociologist M. N. Srinivas described as a “dominant caste” formation. This transformation involved a gradual shift from anti-hierarchical religious activism toward institutional consolidation, educational expansion, and strategic political engagement.

### **2.1 The Vachana Movement and Egalitarian Ethics**

The foundational philosophical corpus of Lingayatism is found in the Vachanas—short, vernacular poetic compositions that redefined spiritual discourse by making it accessible to ordinary people. The movement introduced several radical principles that challenged established social norms:

- Emphasis on the worship of Ishtalinga, symbolizing a direct and personal connection to the formless divine.
- Explicit rejection of the four-fold varna hierarchy and the assertion of spiritual equality among all human beings.
- Recognition of gender inclusivity, exemplified by figures such as Akka Mahadevi, whose philosophical writings articulated both spiritual autonomy and resistance to patriarchal norms.
- Ethical centrality of Kayaka (dignity of labour), rejecting the notion of “polluting” or inferior occupations.
- Principle of Dasoha, which framed social life around sharing surplus resources and collective welfare.

Collectively, these ideas represented not merely a religious reform but a proto-social movement aimed at restructuring social relations through ethical egalitarianism.

### **2.2 From Reform to Institutionalization**

Over time, especially during the colonial and early post-colonial periods, the Lingayat movement underwent a process of organizational consolidation. Community associations such as the All India Veerashaiva Mahasabha played a significant role in transforming religious solidarity into structured social capital. These organizations promoted access to modern education, professional mobility, and representation in administrative structures, marking the emergence of a modern Lingayat civil society.

This institutionalization produced a paradoxical evolution: a

movement originally articulated as anti-hierarchical gradually acquired significant socio-economic and political influence, enabling it to become one of the key power blocs in Karnataka. Educational trusts, religious Mathas, and caste associations began functioning as mediating institutions between state authority and community aspirations, thereby redefining the meaning of civil society within the regional context.

Modernization: In the early 20th century, the All India Veerashaiva Mahasabha began mobilizing the community to achieve goals in education and civil service, marking the birth of organized Lingayat civil society.

### **3. The Role of Lingayat Mathas as Civil Society Actors**

Lingayat Mathas are not merely religious centers; they are robust providers of social capital.

#### **1. Sri Siddaganga Matha (Tumakuru)**

Often referred to as the “Kailasa of the Earth,” this Matha is the gold standard for social service in India.

- The “Trivida Dasoha”: Under the leadership of the late Dr. Sree Sree Shivakumara Swamiji (known as the “Walking God”), the Matha pioneered the triple service of providing Food (Anna), Education (Akshara), and Shelter (Arivu).
- Mass Education: It hosts and provides free education, clothing, and food to over 10,000 students simultaneously, regardless of their caste or religion.
- Rural Upliftment: The annual cattle fair and agricultural exhibitions organized here serve as vital knowledge-sharing hubs for Karnataka’s farmers.

#### **2. Sree Suttur Matha / JSS Mahavidyapeetha (Mysuru)**

This Matha has transformed from a local religious center into a global educational conglomerate.

- JSS Mahavidyapeetha: It manages over 350 institutions ranging from primary schools to world-class medical, engineering, and pharmacy colleges across India, the USA, and Mauritius.
- Healthcare: The JSS Hospital in Mysuru is one of the largest philanthropic healthcare providers in the region, offering affordable tertiary care to the rural poor.

### 3. KLE Society (Belagavi)

While technically an educational society rooted in Lingayat principles and backed by Northern Karnataka's Mathas, its impact is monumental.

- **Healthcare Infrastructure:** The KLE Prabhakar Kore Hospital is one of the largest in Asia, providing critical medical services to the border regions of Karnataka and Maharashtra.
- **Professional Education:** It has been instrumental in making Belagavi an educational hub, preventing "brain drain" from North Karnataka to Bengaluru or Mumbai.

### 4. Murugha Rajendra Matha (Chitradurga)

Known for its progressive and reformist stance, this Matha focuses on breaking social barriers.

- **Social Reform:** It is famous for conducting mass weddings (Sharana Vivaha) that are simple, devoid of dowry, and often inter-caste, aimed at reducing the financial burden on poor families.
- **Ecological Awareness:** The Matha has been a leader in promoting environmental conservation and tree-planting drives in the drought-prone central Karnataka region.

### 5. Sri Taralabalu Jagadguru Brihanmath (Sirigere)

This Matha is renowned for its intersection with technology and rural justice.

- **Rural Justice (Nyaya Peetha):** The Swamiji holds a weekly saddharma nyaya peetha (court) to resolve local disputes (land, family, or water) outside the formal legal system, saving villagers years of litigation and legal fees.
- **Irrigation Projects:** The Matha has actively lobbied for and funded lift irrigation projects to bring water to parched lands in Davanagere and Chitradurga districts.

Through the practice of Trivida Dasoha (food, education, and shelter), Lingayat Mathas institutionalize a parallel welfare framework that compensates for gaps in rural state provision. Their activities demonstrate how religious institutions can assume quasi-public functions, supplying social services in areas characterized by limited governmental reach or administrative inefficiency. Thus, the Mathas operate not merely as

spiritual centers but as intermediary institutions linking community welfare and socio-political mobilization.

Political Arbitration: Mathas often serve as the primary site for political negotiation. The “Matha culture” in Karnataka dictates that political candidates, regardless of party, must seek the endorsement of influential seers.

#### 4. The Demand for Separate Religious Status (2018–2025)

A defining tension in recent years is the distinction between “Veerashaiva” (aligned with Vedic traditions) and “Lingayat” (distinct from Hinduism).

A defining tension in Karnataka’s contemporary landscape is the ideological rift between “Veerashaiva” and “Lingayat” identities, a distinction that carries significant legal and socio-political stakes. While the terms are often used interchangeably in casual discourse, the “Lingayat” claim specifically asserts a non-Vedic identity rooted in the 12th-century radical, egalitarian reforms of Basavanna, which sought to establish a society free from caste hierarchies. Conversely, the “Veerashaiva” designation suggests a branch of Vedic Hinduism that aligns more closely with traditional Brahmanical structures. This distinction is at the heart of the current push for separate religious status, as proponents argue that the original Sharanas movement was a distinct departure from Hindu orthodoxy rather than an evolution within it.

The 2018 Pivot: The Siddaramaiah government’s recommendation for separate minority status was a watershed moment that led to significant electoral shifts.

Current Momentum (2025–2026): The Basava Culture Campaign–2025, organized by the Lingayat Matadeeshara Okkoota, has renewed the push for recognition, arguing that the 1871 census originally listed them as a separate religion.

Organization	Primary Stance	Political Leanings
JagatikaLingayat Mahasabha	Demands separate religion/status	Lean towards reformist/secular parties
All India VeerashaivaMahasabha	Advocates for "Veerashaiva-Lingayat" unity	Historically conservative/status quo

PanchamasaliPeetha	Focuses on internal reservation (2A Category)	Active pressure group on BJP/Congress
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### 5. Challenges: Internal Divisions and External Pressures

The movement faces significant internal “sub-caste” friction, particularly from the Panchamasali sect, which has staged massive protests for increased reservation benefits. Furthermore, external civil society groups often view the Lingayat dominance as a barrier to the empowerment of “AHINDA” (Minorities, Backward Classes, and Dalits) groups.

### Conclusion

The evolution of Lingayat organizations from a 12th-century radical reformist movement to a dominant socio-political force in the 21st century underscores a unique trajectory of institutionalized social power. By functioning as a “parallel civil society,” Lingayat Mathas have successfully bridged the gap between religious identity and secular governance, providing essential services in education, healthcare, and rural justice that often supplement state provisions.

However, the period between 2018 and 2026 has revealed deep-seated ideological and internal complexities. The ongoing tension between “Veerashaiva” and “Lingayat” identities highlights a fundamental struggle over the community’s historical and theological soul-balancing between an integrationist Vedic Hindu framework and a distinct, non-Vedic egalitarian status. Furthermore, the rise of sub-caste mobilization, such as the Panchamasali reservation protests, alongside external friction with AHINDA groups, suggests that the community’s future influence will depend on its ability to manage internal fragmentation while upholding its foundational Vachana ethics of equality and labor. Ultimately, the Lingayat community continues to be an indispensable arbiter of Karnataka’s democratic and social discourse, demonstrating the enduring power of ethical egalitarianism in a modern political landscape.

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