

The Matha as a Civic Institution: Tracing political subjectivity in South India

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What is the matha?

This research investigates a Hindu institution called the matha (*matha*) in the state of Karnataka in South India. Mathas are often rather misleadingly translated as monasteries. Contrary to the image invoked by its translation of a retreat for renouncers and monks, mathas in South India have very strong engagements with their communities. The mathas and heads of mathas (gurus) provide **free education, free medical care** and **free lodging**, and are a well-established resort for **the resolution of local and family disputes**. Many mathas also provide a base for **community identification**; their gurus act as cultural, spiritual and political leaders. I regard mathas as civic institutions as well as religious institutions, and will endeavour to ascertain how mathas have developed as civic institutions through the manner in which people exercise their political subjectivity.



'Being filled with devotion, give inspiration to the *dharma* (religion or morality)'

Aspects of the matha in which this research is interested

CIVIC

How have mathas grown into non-state civic institutions that provide a variety of welfare service for the local communities?



A matha-school

JUSTICE

How have mathas established themselves as non-state legal authorities?
How have the people of South India sought justice and rights through the matha?
What kind of justice does the matha provide for the people?



A matha-court

REPRESENTATION

How have mathas functioned as political representatives for different communities and have claimed rights and entitlement for these communities?



The newly established matha and guru for cowherd (Golla) caste

Methodology

I will combine **historical and anthropological methods**. To understand the three issues concerning mathas in South India, I will use documents kept in local archives (in Bangalore and Mysore), colonial archives (in Delhi, London and Edinburgh) and historical documents kept in several mathas in Karnataka. I will also use **epic poetry, Kannada literature, and personal memoirs** to focus on *moments when mathas and gurus became contested fields of struggle*. Anthropological methods, such as **participant observation and interviews**, will also be employed. Especially I will conduct detailed research on the matha court by examining several characteristic cases.