

THE UNIFICATION OF KARNATAKA: LANGUAGE, REGIONAL IDENTITY AND STATE FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The unification of Karnataka was one of the most important regional movements in twentieth-century India. Before 1956, Kannada-speaking people lived under several administrative systems: the princely state of Mysore, the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, Hyderabad State, Coorg and smaller princely territories. This fragmentation created differences in education, employment, law and political representation even as print culture and literary organisations strengthened a shared Kannada identity. Using a qualitative historical method, this paper examines the origins, leadership, institutions and political negotiations of the Karnataka unification movement. It argues that unification was neither an automatic result of linguistic similarity nor merely a provincial demand. It was a democratic project that converted cultural consciousness into a programme of administrative integration. Organisations such as the Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha and Kannada Sahitya Parishat, writers such as Aluru Venkata Rao, and leaders working through the national movement created a public sphere across political boundaries. The States Reorganisation Act brought most Kannada-majority territories into the enlarged Mysore State on 1 November 1956; the state was renamed Karnataka in 1973. Unification created a common political framework but did not eliminate regional inequalities or plural identities. Its legacy lies in reconciling linguistic unity with federalism, democracy and internal diversity.

KEYWORDS: *Karnataka, Kannada, unification movement, linguistic states, Aluru Venkata Rao, federalism, regional identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Karnataka is the outcome of a prolonged historical movement rather than the survival of a fixed ancient boundary. Kannada language and literature developed across the Deccan over many centuries, but colonial conquest and princely rule placed Kannada-speaking regions under different governments. By the nineteenth century, a Kannada speaker in Dharwad, Mangaluru, Ballari, Bidar, Kodagu or Mysore could face different official languages, school systems, courts and opportunities for public employment. The idea of “Karnataka”

therefore acquired new political meaning; it represented both cultural belonging and a demand for administrative justice.

The movement must be located within two larger developments. The first was the growth of language-based public life through printing, modern education, associations and journalism. The second was Indian nationalism, which made provincial reorganisation a question of democratic representation. This paper asks how Kannada cultural consciousness became a mass political claim, how the movement interacted with the freedom struggle, and what unification achieved after 1956.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives are to explain the administrative fragmentation of Kannada-speaking areas; examine the role of literary institutions, intellectuals and political leaders; trace the relationship between unification and Indian nationalism; and assess the achievements and limits of the state created in 1956. The paper uses a descriptive-analytical historical method. It draws on the States Reorganisation Act, official Government of Karnataka historical material, writings on the movement and established scholarship on linguistic nationalism and state formation. Sources are read critically because commemorative histories sometimes understate disagreements over boundaries, resources and the position of linguistic minorities.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: A DIVIDED KANNADA REGION

Before British expansion, the territories of present-day Karnataka had belonged to several kingdoms and political cultures, including Vijayanagara, the Deccan Sultanates, Mysore and the Maratha and Hyderabad spheres. Colonial arrangements did not unite Kannada-speaking areas. Instead, they placed them within the Bombay Presidency in the north-west, the Madras Presidency in the south-east and coastal areas, the princely state of Mysore in the south, the Nizam's Hyderabad State in the north-east, Coorg, and smaller princely states. Administrative boundaries rarely followed linguistic distribution.

Fragmentation had practical consequences. Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Urdu and English possessed official advantages in different administrations, while Kannada education and publishing developed unevenly. Regional economies also differed: old Mysore had its own institutions and developmental experience; Bombay Karnataka was linked to western India; Hyderabad Karnataka carried the institutional legacy of the Nizam; coastal districts looked toward Madras and maritime trade. A united state therefore required the negotiation of distinct histories, not simply the drawing of a linguistic map.

4. PRINT CULTURE AND THE KANNADA RENAISSANCE

The intellectual foundation of unification was laid by the nineteenth-century revival of Kannada language and history. Missionary presses, grammars, newspapers, schoolbooks and new literary forms expanded the reading public. Scholars recovered inscriptions and classical texts, while writers debated the condition of Kannada under neighbouring administrative languages. Language became a means of imagining connection among people separated by provincial borders.

The Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha, established at Dharwad in 1890, became an influential centre for Kannada education, publications and discussion. The Kannada Sahitya Parishat, founded in Bengaluru in 1915, organised literary conferences and encouraged common cultural work. These institutions did not speak with one political voice, but they created networks through which teachers, journalists, lawyers and writers could frame the region as a shared public community. Cultural revival thus preceded and enabled organised political mobilisation.

5. ALURU VENKATA RAO AND THE IDEA OF KARNATAKA

Aluru Venkata Rao is widely remembered as the “Kannada Kulapurohita” because he gave the movement a compelling historical vocabulary. His Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava presented Karnataka’s past as a source of dignity and collective purpose. His work did more than praise earlier dynasties: it addressed the demoralisation created by political fragmentation and urged Kannada speakers to imagine themselves as participants in a common historical region.

Yet the movement was larger than any single leader. Intellectuals and activists in Dharwad, Belagavi, Bengaluru, Mangaluru, Kalaburagi and other centres contributed through conferences, newspapers and political organisations. Women participated in literary, educational and nationalist activity, although conventional accounts have often emphasised male leadership. Local activists translated an elite linguistic idea into arguments about schooling, employment, representative government and access to administration.

6. UNIFICATION AND THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The unification demand gained strength after 1920, when the Indian National Congress reorganised many of its provincial committees on linguistic lines. The Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee created political coordination across British provincial boundaries and linked regional aspirations with the anti-colonial struggle. The Belagavi Congress session of 1924, presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, symbolised this connection. Participation in civil disobedience, the salt satyagraha, forest protests, Quit India and movements within princely Mysore produced a shared political experience.

The relationship between nationalism and linguistic regionalism was not necessarily contradictory. Supporters argued that administration in the people’s language would deepen democracy and strengthen India. Nevertheless, leaders feared that immediate reorganisation might intensify boundary disputes or weaken the struggle for independence. Consequently, the Congress repeatedly recognised the linguistic principle while postponing its full implementation. This tension continued after 1947.

7. POST-INDEPENDENCE DEBATE AND THE STATES REORGANISATION COMMISSION

Independence transformed unification from an anti-colonial aspiration into a constitutional question. The integration of princely states removed one barrier, but the new Union initially approached linguistic reorganisation cautiously. The creation of Andhra State in 1953 intensified demands across India and led to the appointment of the States Reorganisation Commission under Fazl Ali, with K. M. Panikkar and H. N. Kunzru as members.

The commission had to balance language with administrative viability, economic resources, communications and minority interests. In the Kannada case, debates concerned the future of Bombay Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, South Kanara, Coorg and boundary areas with mixed populations. Some groups feared domination by the old Mysore region; others questioned the economic consequences of merger. The eventual settlement was therefore a political compromise, not the mechanical application of census figures.

8. REORGANISATION IN 1956

The States Reorganisation Act came into effect on 1 November 1956. The enlarged Mysore State brought together the existing Mysore State with major Kannada-speaking territories transferred from Bombay State, Madras State and Hyderabad State, along with Coorg. This date is observed as Karnataka Rajyotsava. S. Nijalingappa became the first chief minister of the reorganised state, while Bengaluru served as the capital.

The name “Mysore” remained controversial because it appeared to privilege the former princely state over the newly integrated regions. Advocates of “Karnataka” argued that the broader name better represented all Kannada-speaking areas. The Mysore State (Alteration of Name) Act, 1973, brought the name Karnataka into effect from 1 November 1973. Renaming completed an important symbolic stage of the unification project, although administrative and emotional integration remained continuing processes.

9. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Unification provided a common legislature, government and educational framework for most Kannada-speaking people. It strengthened Kannada in administration, public education, broadcasting and cultural institutions. It also allowed statewide planning of roads, irrigation, universities and industry. Rajyotsava celebrations, literature, cinema and public symbols helped create familiarity across regional boundaries.

However, linguistic unity did not remove disparities. Old Mysore, Kittur Karnataka, Kalyana Karnataka, coastal Karnataka, Kodagu, the Malnad and Bengaluru developed under different historical conditions. Demands for special development measures, disputes over water and resources, and claims of regional neglect demonstrate that political integration is not identical with social or economic equality. Article 371J, introduced for the Hyderabad-Karnataka region (now commonly called Kalyana Karnataka), reflects the persistence of historically rooted disadvantage.

Karnataka is also multilingual. Urdu, Tulu, Konkani, Kodava, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Beary and other linguistic communities are part of the state’s history. The democratic meaning of unification is therefore best preserved when support for Kannada is combined with protection for minority languages and local cultures. A linguistic state need not be culturally uniform.

10. DISCUSSION

The Karnataka movement demonstrates that regional identity is historically produced. Kannada supplied a basis for solidarity, but institutions transformed language into political organisation. Literary conferences created cultural networks; nationalist politics created leadership and mobilisation; constitutional reorganisation converted

the demand into a territorial state. Each stage required negotiation among regions with unequal resources and different administrative inheritances.

The movement also illuminates Indian federalism. Linguistic reorganisation was once feared as a threat to national unity, yet it ultimately gave major language communities a legitimate place within the Union. Karnataka's experience supports the view that regional identity and Indian citizenship can reinforce one another when claims are pursued democratically and minority rights are respected.

11. CONCLUSION

The unification of Karnataka was the culmination of cultural revival, institutional work, nationalist mobilisation and constitutional negotiation. It answered the disadvantages created by the division of Kannada-speaking people among several governments and gave a shared linguistic region a common political framework. The contributions of literary organisations, Aluru Venkata Rao and numerous local activists were essential, but the final settlement depended on national state reorganisation and compromise among diverse regions.

The creation of the enlarged Mysore State in 1956 and its renaming as Karnataka in 1973 were decisive achievements rather than the end of history. Regional inequality, boundary questions and linguistic plurality continue to require democratic attention. The lasting lesson of the movement is that unity becomes durable not through uniformity, but through representative institutions, equitable development and respect for diversity within a shared public culture.

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