

KARNATAKA'S ROLE IN THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA: POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

DR. VISWANATH K. S.

Associate Professor, Department of History Government First Grade College, Bellavi
Tumkur District, Bellavi – 572107

ABSTRACT

The history of modern India is often narrated through imperial centres, all-India nationalism and the transfer of power in 1947. Such a framework becomes richer when regional experiences are treated as constitutive rather than supplementary. Karnataka offers an especially instructive case because its modern history developed across British-administered districts, princely Mysore, Hyderabad Karnataka, Bombay Karnataka, Madras Karnataka and the small territory of Coorg. This paper studies Karnataka's contribution to modern India from the late eighteenth century to the decades following independence. It examines resistance to colonial expansion, administrative and economic change in Mysore, social and educational reform, participation in the national movement, the growth of Kannada public culture, and the unification of Kannada-speaking regions in 1956. It argues that Karnataka helped shape modern India in three interconnected ways: by generating distinctive traditions of anti-colonial resistance; by creating regional institutions that mediated modernity through language, caste reform and representative politics; and by demonstrating how linguistic identity could be accommodated within a democratic federal union. Karnataka's experience reveals that Indian nationalism was not a uniform movement radiating from one centre, but a negotiated project built through regional histories, social conflicts and cultural aspirations.

KEYWORDS: Modern India; Karnataka; Mysore; nationalism; social reform; Kannada movement; linguistic reorganisation; federalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern India emerged through the interaction of colonial rule, indigenous political traditions, social reform, capitalist change, nationalism and democratic state formation. Regions entered this process through different institutional arrangements and historical memories. Karnataka is a compelling example because no single political unit contained all Kannada-speaking people during the colonial period. The princely state of Mysore coexisted with Kannada areas governed from Bombay and Madras, territories under the Nizam of Hyderabad, and Coorg

under direct British administration. Consequently, the making of modern Karnataka was inseparable from the making of modern India.

The central argument of this paper is that Karnataka was neither peripheral to Indian nationalism nor merely a beneficiary of national integration. Its political struggles, reform movements, public institutions and linguistic mobilisation actively influenced the character of modern India. The region connected early military resistance with constitutional politics; princely-state reform with popular democracy; and cultural regionalism with an inclusive federal nationalism. Studying these connections also corrects two distortions: the tendency to reduce modern Karnataka to the history of Mysore, and the tendency to describe Indian nationalism without sufficient attention to regional society.

2. SCOPE, SOURCES AND METHOD

The paper follows a historical-analytical method. It synthesises major secondary works on modern India, Mysore and the Kannada movement, while reading political events in relation to social and cultural change. The chronological scope begins with the expansion of Mysore under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan and extends to the reorganisation of states in 1956 and the renaming of Mysore State as Karnataka in 1973. The approach is regional but not isolationist: developments within Karnataka are interpreted as part of wider processes such as colonial state formation, the spread of print, anti-caste thought, Gandhian mass politics and Indian federalism.

3. MYSORE, COLONIAL EXPANSION AND EARLY RESISTANCE

In the late eighteenth century, Mysore became one of the strongest Indian powers to resist the East India Company. Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan reorganised military resources, strengthened revenue administration, promoted state-directed commerce and sought diplomatic alliances against the Company. The four Anglo-Mysore Wars were therefore not isolated dynastic conflicts; they were central to the contest over political supremacy in southern India. Tipu's defeat and death at Srirangapatna in 1799 enabled the Company to reorder the balance of power across the peninsula. The restoration of the Wodeyar dynasty under British paramountcy converted Mysore into a princely state whose sovereignty was sharply circumscribed.

Popular resistance continued after 1799 in varied forms. The uprising associated with Dhondia Wagh challenged the new political order. In Kittur, Rani Chennamma resisted the Company's attempt to annex the principality in 1824, while Sangolli Rayanna sustained an armed campaign after her capture. In Kodagu and coastal and forest zones, colonial interventions also met opposition. These struggles differed in their immediate aims and should not be projected backward as fully developed Indian nationalism. Nevertheless, later nationalist memory turned Chennamma and Rayanna into symbols of freedom because their actions expressed an enduring refusal of foreign political domination.

The 1831 British takeover of Mysore's administration, followed by direct rule through commissioners, brought surveys, bureaucratic regulation, new revenue practices, roads and communications. These measures increased administrative uniformity but also enlarged the state's capacity to extract resources and discipline society. The rendition of Mysore to the Wodeyars in 1881 created a distinctive arrangement: an Indian monarchy

operating under imperial supervision while gradually developing modern departments and limited representative institutions.

4. PRINCELY MYSORE AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF MODERNISATION

Mysore acquired a reputation as a 'model state' during the reigns of the later Wodeyars and the administrations of prominent diwans. Public works, irrigation, education, electrification and industrial enterprises expanded. The Shivanasamudra hydroelectric project, the Krishna Raja Sagara dam, railway development, the University of Mysore and state-supported industries became emblems of planned development. M. Visvesvaraya's emphasis on industrialisation and technical education, and Mirza Ismail's attention to infrastructure and urban development, anticipated concerns that later became central to independent India's developmental state.

This record, however, must be interpreted critically. Modernisation was uneven, agrarian inequalities persisted and political power remained concentrated. Benefits were distributed through hierarchies of caste, class, gender and location. The formation of the Praja Mitra Mandali in 1917 and the subsequent non-Brahmin movement reflected demands for a wider share in education, employment and administration. Mysore's policies of communal representation arose from these conflicts and became an important chapter in the history of affirmative action in India. Thus, institutional modernity in Karnataka was produced not solely by enlightened rulers but through pressure from organised social groups.

Representative institutions also developed gradually. The Mysore Representative Assembly, established in 1881, and the Legislative Council, created in 1907, offered restricted participation rather than full democracy. Yet they provided arenas in which public grievances, budgets and administrative policy could be discussed. Political associations later demanded responsible government. The Mysore experience demonstrates how democratic expectations grew inside princely India and why the freedom struggle cannot be confined to provinces under direct British rule.

5. SOCIAL REFORM, EDUCATION AND NEW PUBLICS

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Karnataka witnessed the growth of schools, colleges, missionary institutions, vernacular publications and voluntary associations. These produced new reading publics and opened debates on caste, religion, women's education and social equality. Earlier egalitarian memories associated with Basavanna and the twelfth-century vachana tradition were reinterpreted in modern reformist language. Lingayat, Vokkaliga, Dalit and other associations used education and organisation to challenge inherited monopolies in public employment and cultural authority.

The work of Kudmul Ranga Rao among oppressed communities in coastal Karnataka, the educational initiatives of various community organisations, and campaigns for access to civic and religious spaces helped create an anti-caste public sphere. In the twentieth century, Siddavanahalli Nijalingappa and other leaders had to negotiate the relationship between caste constituencies and a broader democratic politics. After independence, B. D. Jatti, Devaraj Urs and social-justice movements continued debates over backward-class representation, land

and political power. Karnataka's social history therefore shows that freedom meant more than the end of colonialism; it also raised the question of who could participate in modern institutions.

Women entered public life through education, reform organisations, labour, khadi work and nationalist protest. Figures such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay linked Karnataka to all-India movements in civil disobedience, cooperative organisation, theatre and handicraft revival. Women's participation disrupted the assumption that politics belonged exclusively to men, although patriarchy continued to constrain education, property rights and leadership. The expansion of women's public action was one of the most transformative, if incomplete, dimensions of regional modernity.

6. KARNATAKA IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The Indian National Congress developed networks in Kannada-speaking regions through lawyers, teachers, journalists, merchants and local associations. The Belgaum session of the Congress in 1924, the only annual session presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, symbolised Karnataka's integration into national politics. Gangadharrao Deshpande became an important organiser of Gandhian activity, promoting khadi, constructive work and mass mobilisation. The choice of Belgaum was also significant because the city stood at the intersection of linguistic regions and political jurisdictions.

The Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements drew participation from towns and rural areas. The Ankola no-tax campaign in Uttara Kannada, forest satyagrahas, salt actions along the coast, picketing and khadi work adapted national programmes to local conditions. At the same time, labour unrest in industrial centres and peasant grievances broadened the social content of politics. Newspapers and Kannada literature translated national ideas into regional idioms, making the nation imaginable through familiar histories and symbols.

In princely Mysore, the demand for responsible government acquired increasing force. The Mysore Congress and other organisations challenged restrictions on political activity and sought a ministry accountable to elected representatives. The 1938 Vidurashwatha firing, in which police opened fire on demonstrators, became a powerful symbol of repression in the princely state. During the Quit India movement of 1942, underground activity, student participation, labour protest and rural mobilisation appeared across the region. These events refute the notion that princely Mysore remained politically passive because of its developmental reputation.

The Hyderabad Karnataka region followed another trajectory. Kannada-speaking districts under the Nizam experienced autocratic rule and the turbulence surrounding Hyderabad's accession to India. The Hyderabad liberation movement, peasant struggles and the police action of 1948 formed the immediate background to their integration into the Union. Regional disparities that persisted after unification were rooted partly in these unequal colonial and princely inheritances.

7. KANNADA PUBLIC CULTURE AND THE IDEA OF UNIFICATION

Because Kannada speakers were divided among several administrations, language became both a cultural resource and a political claim. Print capitalism, literary associations, school textbooks and historical writing helped standardise Kannada and create awareness of a shared region. The Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha, founded at Dharwad in 1890, and the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, established in Bengaluru in 1915, were central to

this public culture. Writers and scholars recovered inscriptions, folklore, literature and memories of earlier kingdoms to narrate a connected Kannada past.

Aluru Venkata Rao gave the unification movement one of its most influential historical formulations. His Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava encouraged Kannada speakers to see political fragmentation as a historical loss that could be overcome through collective action. Literature, music and theatre carried the idea beyond formal political meetings. The song 'Udayavagali Namma Cheluva Kannada Nadu' captured the emotional aspiration for a united land. Cultural nationalism here did not necessarily contradict Indian nationalism. For many activists, a strong Kannada identity and commitment to India were mutually reinforcing.

The movement nevertheless contained tensions. Linguistic boundaries rarely corresponded perfectly with settlement patterns, and border districts contained multilingual populations. Questions of caste, regional dominance and the relative status of Bengaluru, Mysore, Dharwad, Mangaluru, Kalaburagi and other centres complicated unity. A responsible history must therefore treat Karnataka not as a culturally homogeneous essence but as a negotiated political community formed through diversity.

8. UNIFICATION, FEDERALISM AND POSTCOLONIAL KARNATAKA

Independence in 1947 did not immediately unite all Kannada-speaking territories. The Constitution created Mysore as a Part B state, while other Kannada regions remained in Bombay, Madras and Hyderabad states and Coorg became a separate unit. The States Reorganisation Commission examined linguistic, administrative and economic considerations. On 1 November 1956, the enlarged Mysore State brought together most Kannada-speaking areas. In 1973 it was renamed Karnataka, giving the state a name that more adequately represented all its regions.

The unification of Karnataka was part of a wider transformation of Indian federalism. Linguistic reorganisation was initially feared by some national leaders as a threat to unity, but it ultimately strengthened democratic legitimacy by allowing regional languages and identities institutional space within the Union. Karnataka illustrates how subnational identity can support rather than weaken national integration when expressed through constitutional politics. The state became a forum in which diverse regional experiences could bargain over resources, representation and development.

Post-unification integration remained incomplete. Old Mysore possessed administrative and educational advantages, while northern and Hyderabad Karnataka districts faced deeper infrastructural deficits. Disputes over river waters, borders and the distribution of public investment showed that federalism involved continuing negotiation. Land reform and backward-class policies, especially under Devaraj Urs in the 1970s, attempted to alter entrenched social power. Bengaluru's later rise as a scientific, public-sector and technological centre connected Karnataka to national planning and globalisation, but also intensified rural-urban and regional inequalities.

9. KARNATAKA'S LARGER CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN INDIA

Karnataka's contribution to modern India may be summarised in four dimensions. First, its anti-colonial traditions—from Mysore's wars to mass satyagraha—expanded the geographical and social history of resistance.

Second, princely Mysore's experiments in public administration, engineering, higher education, industry and representation offered both models and warnings for national development. Third, social movements compelled modern institutions to address caste inequality and broaden access to education and employment. Fourth, linguistic unification demonstrated the capacity of the Indian Constitution to reconcile regional nationality with political unity.

These contributions were never uncontested achievements. Royal development coexisted with limited sovereignty and restricted democracy; nationalism sometimes reproduced social hierarchy; linguistic unity could obscure internal diversity; and economic modernisation generated new exclusions. Precisely for this reason, Karnataka is valuable to historical analysis. It reveals modern India as an unfinished democratic project rather than a completed transition from colonialism to nationhood.

10. CONCLUSION

The making of modern India was a multilayered process constructed through regions, languages and unequal social formations. Karnataka participated in this process through military resistance, institutional innovation, public debate, social reform, Gandhian mobilisation, responsible-government movements and the struggle for linguistic unification. Its history connects the fall of Tipu Sultan's state to the rise of colonial paramountcy, the modernising ambitions of princely Mysore to demands for social representation, and Kannada cultural awakening to the federal reorganisation of India.

A regional perspective does not fragment national history; it explains how the nation was actually produced. Karnataka's experience shows that Indian unity gained strength when it recognised linguistic dignity and opened institutions to democratic negotiation. It also reminds historians that political integration without social equality or balanced regional development remains incomplete. Modern Karnataka, like modern India, is therefore best understood as a continuing conversation among memory, identity, democracy and development.

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