

MODERN MYSORE AND THE MAKING OF MODERN KARNATAKA

State Formation, Institutional Modernity and Regional Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical role of the princely state of Mysore in the making of modern Karnataka from the restoration of the Wadiyar dynasty in 1881 to linguistic reorganisation in 1956. It argues that modern Mysore was neither simply a model native state nor merely a subordinate unit of British paramountcy. It was a negotiated political space in which monarchical authority, colonial supervision, professional bureaucracy, representative institutions and regional public opinion interacted. Mysore's investments in irrigation, hydroelectricity, industries, education, public health and local self-government created an influential vocabulary of developmental rule. At the same time, caste inequality, uneven regional development and restricted political participation generated social movements and demands for responsible government. The paper also places Mysore within the wider Kannada unification movement, showing how print culture, historical consciousness and political mobilisation linked the princely state to Kannada-speaking districts under British and other administrations. The integration of Mysore after independence and the formation of an enlarged Mysore State in 1956 converted an older dynastic name into the institutional core of a linguistic state, renamed Karnataka in 1973. Modern Karnataka thus emerged through both continuity and contestation: it inherited Mysore's administrative capacities while being reshaped by democratic politics and the claims of diverse regions.

KEYWORDS: Mysore, modern Karnataka, Wadiyars, princely state, development, representative government, Kannada unification.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of modern Karnataka cannot be understood without examining Mysore. During the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, the princely state became a major centre of administrative experimentation, economic planning and Kannada cultural life. Its rulers and diwans cultivated the reputation of a "model state,"

while public associations, newspapers, caste organisations and political movements steadily widened the meaning of citizenship. The historical significance of Mysore lies not in an uncomplicated record of progress but in the interaction between state-led modernisation and popular demands for representation, equality and regional unity.

In this paper, “modern Mysore” refers chiefly to the period from the rendition of the state to Maharaja Chamarajendra Wadiyar X in 1881 through accession and integration after 1947. The term “Karnataka” refers both to the larger Kannada cultural region and to the linguistic state formed in 1956. The central argument is that Mysore supplied much of the administrative and developmental infrastructure of the later state, whereas the unification movement and democratic mobilisation altered its territorial scale and political legitimacy. The making of Karnataka was therefore a process of inheritance, negotiation and reconstruction rather than a simple enlargement of Mysore.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

The study has three objectives: to identify the principal institutions of modernisation developed in Mysore; to examine the social and political limits of princely reform; and to assess Mysore’s place in the creation of a unified Kannada-speaking state. It uses a historical-analytical method based on published administrative reports, political histories, biographies and scholarship on princely India, nationalism and regionalism. Official narratives of progress are read alongside accounts of non-Brahmin mobilisation, labour politics and the responsible-government movement. This approach avoids treating development as a gift from above and instead situates it within relations of power.

3. RENDITION, PARAMOUNTCY AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONSOLIDATION

The rendition of 1881 restored direct Wadiyar rule after five decades of administration by British commissioners. Yet restoration did not mean full sovereignty. Mysore continued under British paramountcy, and the rendition settlement imposed fiscal and political obligations. Within these limits, the court and the diwanate constructed an increasingly professional administration. Departments were reorganised, revenue and judicial procedures regularised, statistics collected and communications expanded. The state’s ability to recruit trained officials and to draw upon Indian and European expertise became an important source of institutional continuity (Manor, 1977; Ramusack, 2004).

The office of the diwan linked the palace to a modern bureaucratic apparatus. Figures such as K. Seshadri Iyer, V. P. Madhava Rao, T. Ananda Rao, Sir M. Visvesvaraya and Sir Mirza Ismail shaped distinctive phases of governance. Their policies differed, but each worked within a structure that combined monarchical patronage, administrative professionalism and colonial constraint. The Mysore Representative Assembly, established in 1881, and the Legislative Council, created in 1907, offered limited consultation. Franchise and authority were narrow, yet these institutions gave educated elites and organised interests a forum in which budgets, taxation and public works could be debated.

Mysore’s reputation for efficient government must therefore be treated critically. The state was capable of long-term projects because executive power was concentrated and revenues could be directed administratively. The same concentration restricted accountability. Representative bodies could advise and criticise but did not

initially control ministers. Modern institutions grew inside a princely order, producing a hybrid polity rather than a constitutional democracy.

4. DEVELOPMENTAL STATE: IRRIGATION, POWER AND INDUSTRY

Economic modernisation became the most visible feature of Mysore's public identity. Irrigation works sought to reduce dependence on uncertain rainfall and expand cultivation. The Krishna Raja Sagara dam across the Cauvery, closely associated with Visvesvaraya's tenure and completed in stages, transformed irrigation in the Mandya region and supported urban water supply. Its benefits were substantial, but they were regionally concentrated and accompanied by the social consequences of large engineering projects. Tank restoration, road building and railway expansion also connected markets and administrative centres.

The Shivanasamudra hydroelectric project, commissioned in 1902, supplied power to the Kolar Gold Fields and later to Bengaluru and Mysuru. Electrification encouraged manufacturing and strengthened the state's image as a technological pioneer. Under Visvesvaraya, the slogan of industrialisation was translated into institutions supporting technical expertise, banking and enterprise. The Bank of Mysore, the Mysore Iron and Steel Works at Bhadravati, sandalwood oil and soap factories, and other ventures illustrate the use of public initiative where private capital was limited (Visvesvaraya, 1951).

Later, Mirza Ismail emphasised industrial growth, urban improvement and negotiation with commercial interests. Bengaluru developed as an administrative, military, industrial and scientific centre, while Mysuru retained its importance as the royal capital and cultural showcase. These achievements anticipated postcolonial planning by assigning the state an active role in infrastructure, finance and industrial risk. Nevertheless, development remained uneven. Old Mysore districts benefited differently, rural debt persisted and labour conditions in mines, plantations and factories exposed the costs behind the language of progress.

5. EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE AND PUBLIC CULTURE

Education was central to the construction of a modern public sphere. Expansion of schools, scholarships, teacher training and professional education created new social aspirations. The University of Mysore, founded in 1916, became the first university established by an Indian princely state. Its colleges and departments strengthened research and higher education while giving Kannada intellectual life an institutional base. Technical training and engineering education served the developmental programme, and institutions devoted to science, medicine and administration helped form a professional middle class.

Royal patronage also supported literature, music, architecture and museums. Yet cultural modernity did not remain confined to court sponsorship. Newspapers, libraries, debating associations and literary organisations connected Mysore with Dharwad, Mangaluru, Belagavi and other Kannada-speaking centres outside the princely state. The Kannada Sahitya Parishat, established in Bengaluru in 1915, promoted language, terminology, publication and literary conferences. Such networks made language a means of imagining a region divided among several political jurisdictions (Nair, 2011).

Access to education was socially unequal. Upper-caste groups initially held a disproportionate share of offices because of earlier educational opportunity. Missionary institutions, community associations and state measures

gradually broadened access. Women's education expanded, though gendered barriers remained strong. Education consequently operated in two directions: it supplied personnel for the state and created citizens capable of questioning the distribution of state employment and privilege.

6. SOCIAL REFORM AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

The social history of modern Mysore complicates celebratory accounts of enlightened rule. Questions of caste, community and representation became central to public politics. The Praja Mitra Mandali and related non-Brahmin initiatives argued that public employment and education should reflect the social composition of the state. The Miller Committee, appointed in 1918, investigated the position of communities described as backward and recommended measures to improve their access to government service and education. Subsequent reservations made Mysore an important early site of affirmative state policy.

These measures did not eliminate hierarchy, nor did the category "non-Brahmin" represent a single interest. Dominant agrarian groups, minorities, Dalits and other disadvantaged communities possessed different resources and expectations. Anti-untouchability work, demands for temple access and struggles for educational opportunity continued. The princely state alternated between reform, accommodation and control, while organisations used petitions, conferences and the press to transform community grievances into claims upon government.

Women participated in educational, associational and nationalist activity, although formal politics remained largely male-dominated. Social reformers addressed widowhood, child marriage, literacy and public health, but reform often carried paternal assumptions. A balanced assessment must therefore distinguish between institutional innovation and substantive equality. Mysore's significance lies partly in making representation an unavoidable issue of governance, not in resolving it.

7. NATIONALISM AND RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

Because Mysore was a princely state, nationalist politics developed differently from politics in directly ruled British provinces. The Indian National Congress initially proceeded cautiously in princely territories, while local leaders formed organisations focused on civil liberties and responsible government. The Mysore Congress and the Praja Paksha, later joined in the Praja Samyukta Paksha, expressed overlapping demands. The Mysore Chalo movement of 1947 crystallised pressure for a ministry responsible to an elected legislature.

National symbols could become sites of confrontation. The Vidurashwatha firing of 1938, in which police killed demonstrators gathered during a flag satyagraha, became a powerful memory of repression and sacrifice. Labour unrest in industrial centres and political organisation in Bengaluru and the Kolar Gold Fields further widened the social base of protest. These struggles challenge the idea that an efficient developmental monarchy could substitute indefinitely for popular sovereignty.

The Wadiyar court retained considerable legitimacy among sections of the population, and politics was not reducible to a simple conflict between ruler and people. Negotiation involved palace officials, constitutional reformers, Congress leaders, community organisations and the Government of India. By independence, however, the principle of responsible government had become decisive. Mysore acceded to the Indian Union in 1947, and its transition to elected government placed inherited institutions within a new constitutional order.

8. KANNADA UNIFICATION AND THE ENLARGED MYSORE STATE

Modern Karnataka emerged from a fragmented Kannada-speaking world. Kannada districts were divided among the princely state of Mysore, the Bombay and Madras presidencies, the Nizam's Hyderabad, Coorg and smaller jurisdictions. Administrative boundaries shaped education, employment and political experience, while the spread of Marathi, Telugu, Tamil and English in official domains generated concern about Kannada's status. Writers, teachers, lawyers and associations responded by promoting linguistic research, textbooks, newspapers and conferences.

Aluru Venkata Rao's historical writing gave the unification movement an influential language of "Karnatakatva," linking memories of earlier polities to a modern territorial aspiration. The Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha at Dharwad and the Kannada Sahitya Parishat served as major platforms. The 1924 Belgaum Congress session, presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, strengthened contacts among nationalists and advocates of unification. Yet the movement was never culturally or politically uniform. Different regions feared domination, disputed capitals and resources, and carried distinct experiences of land tenure, education and public administration.

After independence, the States Reorganisation Commission recommended linguistic reorganisation while weighing administrative and economic considerations. On 1 November 1956, the enlarged Mysore State brought together most Kannada-speaking territories. The former princely state contributed Bengaluru as capital and a substantial administrative framework, but the new state was not simply "Greater Mysore." It included Bombay-Karnataka, Hyderabad-Karnataka, coastal Karnataka and Coorg, each with its own historical trajectory. Regional integration required harmonising laws, services, educational systems and development priorities (Government of India, 1955).

The retention of the name Mysore generated dissatisfaction because it appeared to privilege the old princely region. Renaming the state Karnataka in 1973 symbolically acknowledged the wider historical and linguistic community. The change clarified a crucial distinction: Mysore remained indispensable to state formation, but Karnataka could not be contained within Mysore's dynastic geography.

9. MYSORE'S INSTITUTIONAL LEGACY IN KARNATAKA

Post-1956 Karnataka inherited a strong tradition of public administration, engineering, education and state-supported enterprise from Mysore. Bengaluru's later emergence as a centre of public-sector industry, science and technology rested partly on earlier investments in electricity, research, technical training and urban infrastructure. Institutions such as the University of Mysore, public utilities and major irrigation systems continued to shape development. The ideal of the state as an active promoter of welfare and economic transformation also survived into democratic planning.

At the same time, the enlarged state exposed the limits of the Mysore model. Developmental disparities between southern districts and northern or northeastern regions became persistent political concerns. Land reform, decentralisation, linguistic policy and reservations were debated within a mass electorate rather than a princely constitution. The legacy of Mysore was therefore selective: administrative capacity endured, while monarchical authority was replaced by democratic accountability and interstate federalism.

Modern Karnataka's identity remains plural. Kannada provides a shared public language, but regional dialects, religious traditions, caste histories and local memories resist homogenisation. Mysore's most productive legacy is consequently not a claim to exclusive leadership but an example of how institutions can be adapted. Its history demonstrates that infrastructure and expertise matter, yet durable modernity also requires participation, social justice and balanced regional development.

10. CONCLUSION

Modern Mysore played a foundational role in the making of Karnataka. Between 1881 and 1947, it developed a relatively capable bureaucracy, consultative institutions, universities, irrigation and power systems, banks and industries. These achievements earned admiration across India and furnished the enlarged state with valuable administrative resources. They were, however, produced within the constraints of British paramountcy and princely authority and distributed unevenly across society and territory.

Social movements, non-Brahmin politics, labour action and campaigns for responsible government widened the political community. Simultaneously, the Kannada unification movement connected Mysore to regions governed under different regimes. The formation of the enlarged Mysore State in 1956 and its renaming as Karnataka in 1973 completed neither social equality nor regional integration; rather, they established a democratic arena in which those goals could be pursued. Karnataka was made through the convergence of Mysore's institutional modernity, Kannada cultural mobilisation and postcolonial constitutionalism. Recognising all three processes provides a more balanced account than either royal celebration or nationalist simplification.

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