

FROM COLONIAL RULE TO LINGUISTIC STATEHOOD: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MODERN KARNATAKA IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Modern Karnataka was created through a long transition from fragmented colonial and princely administrations to a unified linguistic state within the Indian Union. This paper examines that transition from the nineteenth century to the renaming of Mysore State as Karnataka in 1973. It argues that linguistic statehood did not arise from cultural sentiment alone. It emerged from unequal administrative experiences, the expansion of Kannada print and education, anti-colonial mobilisation, demands for responsible government, and negotiations over democracy and development after 1947. The paper gives particular attention to differences among Old Mysore, Bombay Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, Madras Karnataka, coastal districts and Coorg. It shows that unification in 1956 was both an achievement of popular politics and the beginning of a more difficult task: integrating regions with unequal resources and institutional legacies. Karnataka demonstrates that linguistic regionalism, when channelled through constitutional politics, could deepen rather than diminish Indian unity. At the same time, disputes over representation, borders, water and regional imbalance reveal the continuing limits of formal integration.

KEYWORDS: *Karnataka; colonialism; Mysore; Kannada nationalism; Ekikarana; state reorganisation; federalism; regional development*

1. INTRODUCTION

The political map of present-day Karnataka is a relatively recent creation. Before 1956, Kannada-speaking communities lived under several administrations with different laws, educational systems and patterns of political participation. The princely state of Mysore contained a large Kannada population, but important Kannada districts were governed from Bombay, Madras and Hyderabad. Coorg formed a separate province. These divisions shaped economic opportunities, linguistic policy and political identity. The history of modern Karnataka must therefore explain not only opposition to colonial rule but also how scattered territories came to imagine and establish a common state.

This paper interprets the formation of Karnataka as a process of democratic territorial integration. Its principal claim is that Kannada linguistic consciousness gained political force because language became connected to practical questions: access to education and employment, representation in administration, preservation of literature, and balanced development. The movement for unification, known as Karnataka Ekikarana, linked regional belonging with Indian nationalism. Its success illustrates the federal adaptability of independent India, while its unresolved tensions demonstrate that shared language alone cannot erase historical inequality.

2. HISTORICAL METHOD AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORK

The study uses a historical-analytical approach based on major works on Mysore, Indian nationalism and post-independence state formation. Rather than treating Karnataka as a timeless cultural unit, it follows the institutions and political arguments through which the region was constructed. The analysis distinguishes between cultural integration, territorial reorganisation and socioeconomic integration. These were related but separate processes, and each proceeded at a different pace.

A regional framework is essential because colonial experience was uneven. Directly ruled districts were integrated into the presidencies of Bombay and Madras; Hyderabad Karnataka remained under the Nizam; Mysore possessed an Indian ruler under British paramountcy; and Coorg was directly administered as a small province. Consequently, nationalism and constitutional politics acquired different forms across Kannada-speaking areas.

3. COLONIAL FRAGMENTATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE DIFFERENCE

The defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799 allowed the East India Company to redistribute Mysore territory and restore the Wodeyar dynasty under subsidiary control. In 1831, the British assumed direct administration of Mysore, citing maladministration, and governed it through commissioners until the rendition of 1881. During this period, surveys, revenue settlements, roads, bureaucratic departments and courts increased the reach of the state. The changes created administrative uniformity within Mysore but did not unite Kannada areas outside it.

Kannada districts within the Bombay Presidency interacted with Marathi-speaking administrative centres and developed strong traditions of public associations, education and nationalist politics. Coastal and southern districts under Madras had distinct land systems, missionary networks and commercial connections. Hyderabad Karnataka experienced the Nizam's autocratic administration and lower levels of investment in education and infrastructure. Coorg followed another path as a directly ruled province. These differences later influenced political leadership and competing expectations about unification.

Colonial language policies also mattered. English expanded in higher administration, while presidency languages and regional vernaculars competed in schools and public offices. Kannada intellectuals feared that the division of Kannada speakers among administrative units weakened the language's institutional status. The demand for unity therefore arose not merely from nostalgia but from the consequences of bureaucratic fragmentation.

4. MYSORE MODERNITY AND THE DEMAND FOR DEMOCRACY

After 1881, princely Mysore developed institutions that earned it a reputation as a progressive state. The Representative Assembly, the Legislative Council, the University of Mysore, hydroelectricity, irrigation and state-supported industries became symbols of administrative modernity. Diwans such as M. Visvesvaraya promoted technical education, industrialisation and planned economic development. These achievements later provided independent India with experienced administrators, engineers and institutional models.

Yet princely modernity was politically limited. The monarch and diwan remained accountable within a system structured by British paramountcy rather than popular sovereignty. Education and government employment were also distributed unequally among social groups. The non-Brahmin movement and organisations such as the Praja Mitra Mandali demanded wider representation. Mysore's policies of communal representation revealed how caste and public employment became central to modern democratic claims.

During the interwar period, the movement for responsible government grew stronger. The Mysore Congress and other associations sought civil liberties and an executive responsible to elected representatives. The Vidurashwatha firing of 1938 became a regional symbol of sacrifice. By bringing princely-state politics into the wider freedom struggle, these movements demonstrated that national independence without internal democratisation would be incomplete.

5. PRINT, EDUCATION AND THE KANNADA PUBLIC SPHERE

The idea of a united Karnataka depended upon the creation of a Kannada public sphere. Newspapers, journals, schools, libraries, literary conferences and historical works allowed people separated by political boundaries to imagine a common community. The Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha, founded in Dharwad in 1890, worked for the advancement of Kannada language and culture. The Kannada Sahitya Parishat, founded in 1915, encouraged literary exchange, terminology, publication and cultural coordination across regions.

Historical writing gave the movement a usable past. Aluru Venkata Rao's interpretation of Karnataka's former cultural and political achievements encouraged readers to understand contemporary division as a condition that could be changed. Poetry, theatre and public festivals gave emotional form to unification. Kannada identity was thus assembled through institutions and repeated acts of communication rather than simply inherited.

The public sphere was not socially neutral. Literacy and access to publication reflected inequalities of caste, class, gender and location. Non-Brahmin and Dalit movements used education and organisation to question cultural monopolies, while women entered public life through schools, reform associations and nationalist campaigns. The meaning of Karnataka was consequently debated among groups seeking different kinds of recognition.

6. FREEDOM STRUGGLE AND THE POLITICS OF EKI-KARANA

The national movement connected Kannada-speaking regions through common political campaigns. The 1924 Belgaum session of the Indian National Congress, presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, gave Karnataka a prominent place in national politics. Leaders such as Gangadharrao Deshpande linked Gandhian constructive

work with local organisation. Khadi, no-tax campaigns, forest satyagrahas, student activity and civil disobedience carried nationalism into towns and villages.

The unification demand increasingly appeared within this political environment. Congress organisations often used linguistic regions for mobilisation, strengthening the idea that democratic participation could be organised through the mother tongue. Supporters of Ekikarana argued that a unified state would improve Kannada education, make administration accessible and promote economic coordination. They usually presented these aims as compatible with a strong Indian Union.

Experiences under the Nizam added a different dimension. The integration of Hyderabad into India in 1948 ended princely autocracy but left Hyderabad Karnataka with serious developmental disadvantages. The freedom of these districts and their later inclusion in Mysore State linked political liberation, linguistic affiliation and expectations of economic justice.

7. INDEPENDENCE AND THE ROAD TO REORGANISATION

Independence did not immediately produce a unified Karnataka. The former princely state became Mysore State, while Kannada-speaking districts remained in Bombay, Madras and Hyderabad states; Coorg existed separately. National leaders had to balance linguistic aspirations against concerns about administrative viability, minority rights and national unity. Popular pressure across India made the question unavoidable.

The States Reorganisation Commission evaluated language alongside economic, administrative and geographic considerations. The States Reorganisation Act came into effect on 1 November 1956. Kannada-majority territories from the former Bombay, Hyderabad and Madras states, together with Coorg, were joined to Mysore. The event is commemorated as Karnataka Rajyotsava. It marked the institutional victory of a movement sustained by writers, teachers, activists, legislators and civic organisations.

Reorganisation nevertheless involved difficult boundary decisions. Linguistically mixed areas could not be divided without controversy, and the Belagavi border dispute became a continuing issue between Karnataka and Maharashtra. Such disputes show that linguistic maps cannot perfectly represent multilingual social realities. Federal accommodation requires legal institutions, negotiation and protection for linguistic minorities.

8. INTEGRATION AFTER 1956: ACHIEVEMENT AND IMBALANCE

The enlarged state inherited different revenue systems, service rules, educational structures and political cultures. Administrative integration required the harmonisation of departments and the redistribution of authority. Bengaluru became the capital, but leaders from northern, coastal and central regions demanded equitable representation and investment. The state's name remained Mysore until 1973, when it was changed to Karnataka to express a broader identity not limited to the old princely territory.

Economic integration proved more difficult than territorial union. Old Mysore had advantages in administration, irrigation, higher education and industry. Several northern districts, especially in the former Hyderabad region, suffered from weaker infrastructure and lower educational access. Regional imbalance

therefore became a persistent theme in Karnataka politics. Later measures, including special constitutional attention to the Hyderabad Karnataka region, reflected the continuing effort to correct historical disparities.

Social justice also reshaped the unified state. Land reform, reservations and backward-class mobilisation challenged older concentrations of power. Under Devaraj Urs in the 1970s, policies toward land and backward communities widened political participation. These changes show that regional unity had to be democratised from within; otherwise it risked replacing colonial fragmentation with dominance by better-positioned regions and groups.

9. KARNATAKA AND INDIAN FEDERALISM

Karnataka's formation helped establish linguistic federalism as a durable principle of the Indian republic. Rather than causing national disintegration, states organised substantially around language created a legitimate arena for regional administration and cultural life. Citizens could identify with Kannada language and Karnataka while participating fully in Indian politics. This layered identity became one of the foundations of India's federal stability.

Federalism also generated negotiation over resources. River-water disputes involving the Cauvery, Krishna and Mahadayi, debates over central investment, and border questions tied state politics to national institutions. Courts, tribunals, commissions and intergovernmental bargaining became mechanisms for managing conflict. Karnataka's history therefore demonstrates that national unity is maintained not by eliminating regional claims but by giving them constitutional channels.

Bengaluru's development as a centre of public-sector industry, science, education and information technology further connected the state to national and global economies. Yet metropolitan growth widened contrasts with drought-prone and rural districts. The modern state consequently faces a double task: sustaining cultural cohesion and distributing the benefits of development more evenly.

10. CONCLUSION

The transformation of modern Karnataka from a divided colonial region into a linguistic state was the product of more than administrative reorganisation. It grew from the interaction of Kannada cultural revival, social reform, anti-colonial nationalism, responsible-government movements and constitutional negotiation. The 1956 unification translated a cultural and political aspiration into a territorial institution, while the adoption of the name Karnataka in 1973 completed an important symbolic stage.

The history also cautions against treating unification as a final solution. Unequal colonial inheritances, caste hierarchy, border disputes and regional disparities survived the redrawing of boundaries. Karnataka's experience shows that federal democracy is a continuous process of accommodation and redistribution. Its larger contribution to modern India lies in demonstrating how regional identity can strengthen a plural nation when cultural dignity is joined to representative politics, minority protection and a commitment to balanced development.

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