

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE PRINCELY STATE OF MYSORE (1881–1950): GOVERNANCE, REFORM, AND THE MAKING OF A ‘MODEL STATE’

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Abstract

The Princely State of Mysore occupies a unique and influential position within the political history of colonial India. Frequently celebrated as a “Model State,” Mysore exemplified an alternative trajectory of modernization under indirect British rule. This article examines the socio-political and administrative transformation of Mysore between 1881 and 1950, a period spanning the Rendition of power to the Wodeyar dynasty and the integration of the state into the Indian Union. It focuses on institutional innovation, economic planning, infrastructural modernization, and pioneering social justice policies. Drawing upon administrative reports and secondary scholarship, the study argues that Mysore represents a significant counter-narrative to the dominant historiography that portrays princely states as politically regressive.

Index Terms: *Wodeyars, Cultural Renaissance, Mysore Architecture, Model State, Socio-economic reforms.*

INTRODUCTION

The political and administrative history of Mysore occupies a complex position within the historiography of colonial India, often challenging the traditional narratives that depict princely states as stagnant feudal remnants or mere colonial appendages. While nationalist and colonial discourses have frequently overlooked the internal dynamism of these polities, Mysore between 1881 and 1950 emerged as one of the most sophisticated and socially progressive regions in the subcontinent. Its transformation was not a mere byproduct of British intervention but the result of deliberate institutional planning and an indigenous commitment to public welfare. Following the Rendition, the state indigenized bureaucratic structures and embedded them within a political culture shaped by local priorities and developmental ambition.

This article argues that Mysore represents a unique trajectory of reformist state-led modernization under indirect rule, exercising significant internal autonomy to pursue long-term developmental strategies and institutionalize public participation. This phase marked a decisive rupture where monarchy was redefined as constitutional and institutional rather than autocratic. The Maharaja functioned as the moral head of the state, while effective governance was carried out through a professional bureaucracy and technocratic leadership. Often described as a Golden Age, this period saw the expansion of education, infrastructure, and pioneering social justice policies that distinguished Mysore from its contemporaries.

By foregrounding Mysore’s experience, this study moves beyond reductive categorizations to illustrate how modernity was selectively appropriated and localized by indigenous actors. The administrative evolution of Mysore suggests that the capacity for reform and social intervention emerged through hybrid institutional arrangements that combined traditional authority with modern rationality. Ultimately, this metamorphosis underscores the significance of princely states as laboratories of political experimentation whose legacies continued to influence post-independence governance. Mysore stands as a critical case for understanding the complexities of colonial modernity and the enduring impact of institutional vision.

1. THE RENDITION OF 1881 AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF SOVEREIGNTY

The Rendition of Mysore in 1881 stands as one of the most consequential constitutional events in the history of princely India. After fifty years of direct British administration, power was formally restored to the Wodeyar dynasty, marking the end of a period officially termed as temporary trusteeship. However, interpreting the Rendition merely as a restoration of monarchical authority would be historically misleading. In practice, it represented a profound reconfiguration of sovereignty, redefining the nature of political authority, administrative responsibility, and imperial control within the framework of indirect rule. By this period, British imperial policy had decisively shifted toward the consolidation of indirect rule, especially following the Revolt of 1857, where the Crown became cautious about direct annexation. The doctrine of paramountcy allowed the British to retain ultimate authority while delegating internal administration to princely rulers, provided that revenue stability, law and order, and political loyalty were safeguarded.

Mysore occupied a distinctive position within this imperial logic because it had already experienced a prolonged phase of direct British governance, which introduced modern administrative systems like standardized revenue assessment and departmental organization. Consequently, the Rendition of 1881 did not restore pre-colonial sovereignty but inaugurated a hybrid constitutional arrangement in which sovereignty was shared and functionally divided. This concept of negotiated sovereignty is crucial to understanding the Mysore case; it was a spectrum of authority where the state interpreted its internal autonomy with unusual creativity. Although the British retained the right to intervene in cases of maladministration, they largely refrained from doing so due to Mysore's administrative competence. This tacit confidence distinguished Mysore from many other princely states, allowing the Resident to function more as an observer than an active governor, thereby enabling the state to convert constitutional limitations into administrative opportunities.

The success of this post-Rendition political order was closely tied to the nature of monarchical leadership. Chamarajendra Wodeyar X and later Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar embodied a new model of princely authority that emphasized institutional guardianship over personal rule. The Maharaja increasingly functioned as a constitutional monarch, delegating executive authority to Diwans and departmental heads while retaining symbolic and moral roles. Royal authority was thus embedded within a framework of rules and professional norms, aligning Mysore with modern conceptions of the state. One of the most remarkable features of this period was the continuity of administrative structures established during British rule, which ensured that governance remained predictable and rule-bound. The Diwan emerged as the central executive authority, appointed based on competence rather than lineage, which sharply distinguished Mysore from court-centered and opaque princely administrations.

Ultimately, the Rendition of 1881 laid the foundations for Mysore's transformation into a modern state by enabling the coexistence of monarchy and bureaucracy. This political stability was not the product of repression but of institutional legitimacy and administrative performance. The absence of frequent British intervention allowed the state to pursue long-term developmental projects without the disruptions associated with political uncertainty. In retrospect, the Rendition marked the moment when Mysore decisively moved away from patrimonial rule toward a rational-administrative state. This evolution proved remarkably durable, surviving until independence and facilitating Mysore's smooth integration into the Indian Union by creating a framework that enabled governance through institutions rather than personalities.

2. INSTITUTIONALIZING REPRESENTATION: THE MYSORE REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY

One of the most distinctive features of Mysore's political evolution under indirect rule was its early and sustained experiment with representative governance. At a time when most princely states were governed through personalized authority and court-centered administration, Mysore institutionalized public participation through formal legislative mechanisms. The establishment and gradual empowerment of the Mysore Representative Assembly marked a critical departure from autocratic governance and laid the foundations for a deliberative political culture within a monarchical framework. Established in 1881, coinciding with the Rendition of power to the Wodeyar dynasty, its creation was not merely a symbolic concession to public opinion but a deliberate institutional response to the changing political environment of late nineteenth-century India. Unlike advisory councils in many princely states which were often composed of nominated elites with limited influence the Mysore Representative Assembly was conceived as a forum for structured dialogue between the state and its subjects. Members represented various districts, professions, and interest groups, allowing regional and occupational concerns to enter the administrative discourse. This reflected a hybrid political imagination that did not challenge monarchical authority directly, yet asserted the principle that governance required public consultation and accountability.

In its early years, the Representative Assembly functioned primarily as an advisory body where resolutions were recommendatory rather than binding, and executive authority remained firmly with the Maharaja and the Diwan. However, over time, the Assembly acquired increasing significance in the policy-making process as members debated issues related to land revenue, irrigation, education, public health, and taxation. These debates compelled the administration to justify its decisions in public forums, thereby introducing an ethic of transparency. This gradual evolution distinguished Mysore from other princely states where representative bodies remained largely ceremonial. The strengthening of the Legislative Council further enhanced this framework, approximating a bicameral structure within the limits of princely governance. While the Maharaja retained ultimate executive power, governance increasingly operated through institutional channels rather than personal discretion, contributing significantly to Mysore's reputation as a "Model State."

While pioneering in form, Mysore's representative institutions were not fully democratic by modern standards, as membership was initially restricted to educated elites, landlords, and urban professionals. Marginalized communities, women, and rural labourer's remained underrepresented, reflecting the broader social hierarchies of the period. Nevertheless, the Assembly provided a platform through which social grievances could gradually be articulated. Over time, issues related to backward classes and educational access entered the legislative discourse, creating an institutional pathway for later social justice initiatives, including the landmark recommendations of the Miller Committee. Thus, even within its limitations, the Representative Assembly functioned as an incubator of political consciousness and administrative reform.

In a comparative perspective, Mysore's experiment was exceptional; many princely states either lacked legislative institutions altogether or maintained councils under strict royal control. Mysore's relative autonomy and reformist leadership enabled it to institutionalize participation without destabilizing the political order. This gradualist approach contrasted sharply with regions where political reform emerged through confrontation. Perhaps the most enduring contribution of the Assembly was the political culture of accountability it fostered, habituating both administrators and citizens to procedural governance. This prepared Mysore for the transition to democratic governance after independence, ensuring that the state possessed experienced administrators and an institutional memory of representation. Within the broader context of colonial modernity, the Assembly illustrates how representative governance could emerge through indigenous innovation, demonstrating that monarchy could coexist with, and even facilitate, institutional reform.

3. ECONOMIC RENAISSANCE AND DEVELOPMENTAL STATISM IN MYSORE

The transformation of Mysore into a "Model State" was not confined to political institutions alone; it was equally rooted in a deliberate and coherent economic vision. Between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, Mysore pursued a distinctive strategy of state-led economic development, anticipating many principles later associated with postcolonial developmental planning. This approach marked a significant departure from the laissez-faire orientation of British colonial economic policy and positioned Mysore as one of the earliest experiments in developmental statism in India. Unlike colonial governance which was shaped by extractive priorities, Mysore's strategy was guided by the belief that the state bore responsibility for promoting industrial growth, employment, and material welfare. Rather than relying solely on private enterprise, which remained weak and undercapitalized, the state assumed a direct role in establishing industries, financing infrastructure, and fostering technical expertise. This interventionist logic foreshadowed the planned economy framework later adopted by independent India.

Central to this economic renaissance was the rise of technocratic governance, most notably under the Diwanship of M. Visvesvaraya. Trained as an engineer and influenced by global industrialization, Visvesvaraya argued that political autonomy without economic strength was inherently fragile. His celebrated maxim, "Industrialize or Perish," encapsulated a developmental urgency where policy was informed by technical expertise and long-term planning rather than hereditary privilege. Under his leadership, Mysore emphasized public sector industrialization, directly managing key industries such as the Bhadravathi Iron and Steel Works and the Mysore Sandal Soap Factory. These enterprises were conceived not merely as revenue-generating units but as instruments of socio-economic transformation, ensuring that value-added manufacturing remained within the region to foster local skill development and economic self-reliance.

The material foundation of this development was a massive investment in infrastructure, particularly in power and irrigation. The Shivanasamudra Hydroelectric Project, among the earliest in Asia, supplied power to industries and urban centers, while the construction of the Krishna Raja Sagara (KRS) Dam revolutionized agrarian production. By stabilizing irrigation and mitigating the uncertainties of the monsoon, the state

supported rural livelihoods and secured a raw material supply for industries, creating a virtuous cycle of development. Furthermore, Mysore's economic policy demonstrated a strong sense of economic nationalism by seeking to reduce dependence on imperial capital. This indigenous capacity for planning and reform, carried out through administrative institutions, aligned Mysore with broader Indian economic thought while maintaining political stability.

In a comparative perspective, Mysore's policies contrasted sharply with other princely states that relied primarily on agrarian rents. The long-term impact of this developmental statism became evident after independence, as Mysore's infrastructural base and administrative expertise facilitated its smooth integration into the Indian Union. Many institutions established during this princely period continued to function as pillars of Karnataka's postcolonial economy. Ultimately, developmental statism provided the material conditions necessary for social reform and administrative legitimacy, reinforcing the vision of governance oriented toward collective welfare. Mysore thus represents an alternative pathway to modernity one grounded in institutional planning, technocratic expertise, and social responsibility under conditions of constrained sovereignty.

4. SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION: THE MILLER COMMITTEE (1918)

Among the most enduring and transformative contributions of the Mysore state to modern Indian governance was its pioneering engagement with the problem of social inequality. Long before social justice became a constitutional imperative in independent India, Mysore recognized that administrative efficiency and political legitimacy were inseparable from social inclusion. The appointment of the Miller Committee in 1918 marked a watershed moment in the history of affirmative action in India and firmly established Mysore as a forerunner in institutionalized social reform. The social composition of the Mysore state in the early twentieth century reflected deeply entrenched hierarchies where access to education, public employment, and political influence remained disproportionately concentrated among a few dominant communities. As government employment became a key avenue for social mobility, exclusion from state services translated into sustained marginalization, posing a fundamental challenge to Mysore's claim of progressive governance.

In response to growing public debate and petitions regarding this communal imbalance, the Mysore government, under the chairmanship of Sir Leslie Miller, tasked a committee with examining the representation of different communities in state employment. The very appointment of such a committee was radical for its time, as social inequalities were often treated as societal issues beyond the remit of the state elsewhere in colonial India. Mysore, by contrast, recognized inequality as an administrative problem requiring institutional intervention. The committee's findings confirmed a systematic underrepresentation of marginalized communities and rejected the assumption that merit alone determined employment outcomes. Instead, it argued that historical disadvantage constrained access to education and administrative experience, framing social justice not as charity but as a prerequisite for effective governance.

The implementation of these recommendations was facilitated by the reformist orientation of the Mysore monarchy, particularly under Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, whose royal endorsement conferred legitimacy on policies that might otherwise have provoked resistance from privileged groups. By institutionalizing reservations in public employment, the state acknowledged that equality before the law was insufficient without equality of opportunity. This diversification of the bureaucracy transformed the internal culture of administration, enhancing responsiveness to local needs and strengthening political stability. By incorporating marginalized groups into state structures, Mysore mitigated social tensions, using social inclusion as both a strategy of governance and a moral commitment.

In a comparative perspective, Mysore's affirmative action policies were exceptional, as most princely states avoided direct engagement with caste inequalities while British colonial policy remained ambivalent toward reforms that threatened established hierarchies. Historiographically, the Miller Committee challenges the narrative that social justice in India emerged solely from post-independence constitutionalism; instead, it reveals how indigenous states articulated progressive policies within the constraints of indirect rule. The legacy of these principles influenced later debates on reservation policy in Karnataka and demonstrated the feasibility of reconciling administrative rationality with social equity. By embedding affirmative action within bureaucratic structures, Mysore ensured that social justice became a permanent feature of governance, completing the triad of its modernity: political institutions, economic planning, and social justice.

5. CULTURAL PATRONAGE, URBAN PLANNING, AND THE AESTHETICS OF MODERNITY

The modernity of the Mysore state was articulated not only through administrative reform, economic planning, and social justice but also through culture, architecture, and urban design. Cultural patronage and urban planning functioned as integral components of Mysore's political imagination, reinforcing state legitimacy while materializing ideals of order, harmony, and public welfare. Unlike many princely states where royal patronage remained confined to courtly display, Mysore employed culture and urbanism as instruments of governance. In the princely context, culture was inseparable from power; however, in Mysore, cultural patronage underwent a significant transformation toward public visibility and civic purpose. The Wodeyar rulers projected themselves as custodians of both tradition and progress, using festivals and public spaces to foster popular identification with the state. Consequently, culture became a medium through which political legitimacy was communicated and reinforced in a rapidly changing socio-political environment.

The architectural landscape of Mysore offers a compelling illustration of this synthesis. The Amba Vilas Palace, while a symbol of royal authority, reflects an engagement with global architectural idioms through its Indo-Saracenic style rather than a retreat into purely traditional forms. Similarly, public buildings such as courts, hospitals, and educational institutions were constructed with a focus on accessibility and order, serving as a visual grammar of governance. This civic rationality extended into systematic urban planning, which distinguished Mysore from organically grown colonial cities marked by congestion. Wide roads, regulated building norms, and drainage systems embodied a moral vision of governance that linked spatial organization with social well-being. The emphasis on greenery and cleanliness, particularly under the technocratic and aesthetic leadership of administrators like Sir Mirza Ismail, ensured that urban beautification was pursued alongside administrative efficiency.

One of the most innovative aspects of Mysore's cultural policy was the democratization of aesthetic experience. Public spaces like the Brindavan Gardens were conceived as civic amenities rather than exclusive royal domains, transforming leisure into a right rather than a privilege. These spaces fostered social interaction and a sense of collective belonging across class boundaries. Furthermore, cultural patronage was closely linked to educational expansion, where libraries and museums functioned as sites of civic instruction. In comparison with other princely states where architectural grandeur often served only dynastic prestige Mysore embedded cultural investment within an administrative framework oriented toward collective benefit. By harmonizing tradition with innovation, Mysore demonstrated that modernity could be achieved through an adaptive synthesis, where cultural continuity strengthened rather than undermined institutional reform.

6. INTEGRATION INTO INDEPENDENT INDIA AND THE POSTCOLONIAL ADMINISTRATIVE LEGACY

The transition from princely sovereignty to integration within independent India posed a fundamental challenge to Mysore's political and administrative identity. Unlike regions directly administered by the British, princely states had to negotiate the dissolution of dynastic authority while preserving institutional continuity. Mysore's experience during this transition was marked not by rupture or instability but by an unusually smooth adaptation, reflecting the strength and maturity of its administrative structures. This section argues that Mysore's successful integration into the Indian Union was made possible by its prior modernization under indirect rule. The postcolonial state inherited not a fragile feudal apparatus but a functioning administrative system capable of democratic transformation.

THE END OF PRINCELY SOVEREIGNTY AND POLITICAL NEGOTIATION

At the moment of Indian independence, princely states confronted the imperative of accession. While many rulers resisted or delayed integration, Mysore adopted a cooperative and pragmatic approach. The political leadership of the state recognized that sovereignty in the postcolonial era required legitimacy derived from popular consent rather than dynastic tradition. The accession of Mysore to the Indian Union was thus characterized by negotiation rather than coercion. The ruler, Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar, played a decisive role in facilitating this process. His acceptance of constitutional integration reflected both political foresight and an awareness of Mysore's administrative readiness for democratic governance.

CONTINUITY OF INSTITUTIONS AFTER 1947

One of the most striking features of Mysore's post-independence transition was the continuity of its institutions. Unlike many regions where colonial bureaucracies required extensive restructuring, Mysore's administrative departments finance, education, public works, health, and local governance continued to function with minimal disruption. This continuity was not accidental. Decades of institutional planning had produced a professional bureaucracy accustomed to rule-based governance rather than arbitrary authority. Administrative manuals, codified procedures, and trained personnel ensured that governance remained stable during a politically sensitive period. The survival of these institutions underscores the argument that Mysore had already undergone a partial internal decolonization prior to 1947.

CONSTITUTIONAL ADAPTATION AND DEMOCRATIC DEEPENING

Following accession, Mysore rapidly adapted to constitutional governance. Representative institutions expanded, and electoral politics replaced court-centered decision-making. Crucially, this shift did not undermine administrative efficiency. Instead, bureaucratic professionalism provided a stable framework within which democratic participation could grow. Legislative debates, budgetary scrutiny, and policy formulation benefited from the institutional memory of earlier reforms. The state thus avoided the administrative paralysis that afflicted several newly integrated regions. Democracy in Mysore did not emerge in a vacuum; it was layered upon an existing culture of accountability and public service.

LINGUISTIC REORGANIZATION AND THE FORMATION OF KARNATAKA

The reorganization of states on linguistic lines in the mid-twentieth century marked another major transformation. The formation of a unified Kannada-speaking state in 1956 expanded Mysore's territorial and administrative responsibilities. While the enlarged state faced challenges of regional integration, Mysore's administrative traditions provided a stabilizing influence. The bureaucratic ethos developed during the princely period shaped governance practices across the new state, which was later renamed Karnataka. Mysore thus transitioned from a regional princely state to the administrative core of a major linguistic state, extending its institutional legacy far beyond its original boundaries.

WELFARE STATE FOUNDATIONS IN THE POSTCOLONIAL ERA

Independent India adopted a developmental and welfare-oriented model of governance. In this context, Mysore's prior emphasis on public welfare proved highly compatible with national priorities. Programs related to education, public health, irrigation, and social justice found ready institutional frameworks within the state. Rather than constructing welfare mechanisms from scratch, postcolonial policymakers built upon existing systems. This continuity challenges the assumption that princely states were obstacles to modernization; in Mysore's case, they functioned as laboratories of early welfare governance.

ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE AND ETHICAL GOVERNANCE

Beyond formal institutions, Mysore's most enduring legacy lay in its administrative culture. Values such as fiscal prudence, public accountability, and procedural transparency continued to inform governance practices in the postcolonial period. This culture was transmitted through bureaucratic training, institutional norms, and political discourse. Even as political leadership changed, the underlying ethos of governance persisted, shaping policy implementation and administrative conduct. The Mysore experience thus complicates linear narratives of colonial rupture, revealing a layered continuity between princely reformism and postcolonial state-building.

COMPARATIVE POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

In comparison with other former princely states, Mysore stands out for the relative ease of its transition. Regions where governance had remained personalized or underdeveloped faced greater challenges adapting to democratic rule. Mysore's preparedness highlights the importance of institutional depth in shaping postcolonial outcomes. This comparative perspective reinforces the central thesis of this article: modernization under indirect rule could generate durable administrative capacity when driven by indigenous reformist intent.

REASSESSING MYSORE'S PLACE IN INDIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

The postcolonial legacy of Mysore demands a reassessment of its historical significance. Rather than viewing the princely state as a peripheral or anomalous entity, it should be understood as a critical site of institutional experimentation and governance innovation. Mysore's trajectory illustrates an alternative path to

modernity neither colonial imposition nor nationalist rupture, but gradual, state-led reform grounded in local political culture.

CONCLUSION:

The historical experience of Mysore between 1881 and 1950 invites a reconsideration of dominant interpretations of colonial India. Conventional narratives often depict princely states as either feudal survivals or passive collaborators of British imperial power. Mysore challenges this binary understanding by demonstrating that meaningful modernization could occur within the framework of indirect rule through indigenous initiative, institutional planning, and a sustained commitment to public welfare. The Rendition of 1881 marked a critical turning point in Mysore's political history. Rather than restoring an absolutist monarchy, it initiated a phase of administrative consolidation and reform. The Wodeyar rulers and their Diwans selectively adapted colonial administrative practices while embedding them in local political culture. Mysore's early experiments with representative institutions fostered a culture of consultation and accountability long before democratic governance became a national norm. These institutions were not merely symbolic; they contributed to policy deliberation and administrative oversight. Similarly, the state's commitment to developmental planning through investments in infrastructure, industry, irrigation, and education anticipated post-independence models of economic governance. Mysore's approach reflected an understanding that political stability and legitimacy depended on social and economic development. Equally significant was Mysore's pioneering engagement with social justice. The implementation of reservation policies following the Miller Committee's recommendations demonstrated a willingness to address structural inequalities through state action. This intervention marked Mysore as an early innovator in inclusive governance, foreshadowing constitutional principles adopted later at the national level. The smooth integration of Mysore into independent India further confirms the depth of its administrative maturity. Institutional continuity, bureaucratic professionalism, and a welfare-oriented ethos enabled the state to adapt seamlessly to constitutional democracy. Mysore's legacy subsequently shaped the governance culture of postcolonial Karnataka, extending its influence well beyond the princely period. In sum, Mysore represents an alternative trajectory of colonial modernity neither imposed by empire nor born solely of nationalist rupture, but achieved through reformist state-led modernization. Its experience underscores the importance of indigenous agency and institutional depth in shaping durable political and administrative outcomes in modern India.

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