

Reforms Of Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar: A Progressive King Of Mysore

Kakasaheb Laxman Gasti
Ph.D Research Scholar
Department of History and Archaeology
Karnataka University,
Dharward

Abstract

This research article delves into the transformative and reformatory reign of **Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV** (reigned 1902–1940), the enlightened ruler of the princely state of Mysore, widely celebrated for his progressive vision and ethical leadership. Often hailed as a “**Rajarshi**” (philosopher-king), Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV was one of the most forward-thinking monarchs in colonial India, known for his dedication to modernization, human development, and inclusive governance. His rule coincided with a period of increasing national consciousness and anti-colonial struggle across India, yet Mysore stood as a unique model of indigenous governance that worked in tandem with the British colonial framework to deliver welfare-centric reforms.

Under his leadership—and through the administrative genius of Dewans like **Sir M. Visvesvaraya** and **Sir Mirza Ismail**—Mysore became a pioneer in multiple domains: **universal education, industrialization, public health, infrastructure development, constitutional governance, and affirmative action**. Major initiatives included the **establishment of the University of Mysore** (1916), one of India’s earliest modern universities; the **Krishna Raja Sagara (KRS) Dam**, a marvel of engineering and irrigation; the **Mysore Iron and Steel Works** in Bhadravati, fostering industrial self-reliance; and one of the earliest **reservation policies** for backward communities, laying a foundation for modern social justice discourse.

Drawing from **archival records, government documents, memoirs, and academic literature**, this study critically evaluates the holistic reforms introduced during Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV’s rule. It also explores how his legacy continues to influence contemporary governance models in Karnataka and India at large, making a strong case for revisiting princely states as active agents of modernity rather than relics of feudalism.

Keywords : Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, Mysore reforms, Progressive monarchy, Princely states in colonial India, Social justice, Education policy in princely India, Industrialization in Mysore, Reservation policy (affirmative action), Public health reforms, Ethical governance / Good governance

Introduction

In the annals of modern Indian history, the princely state of Mysore occupies a distinctive space—not for its opulence or colonial subservience, but for its **progressive governance and reformist monarchs**, most notably **Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV**. Born in 1884 and ascending the throne in 1902 after a period of regency, his reign extended until his death in 1940. During this span, he presided over one of the most well-administered and socially advanced states in pre-independence India.

Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV's leadership represents a rare confluence of **monarchical authority and democratic impulse, traditional values and modern innovation, and royal power and people-centric governance**. Unlike many other princely rulers of his time who either remained passive figureheads or collaborators of British interests, Krishnaraja Wodeyar actively pursued policies that **prioritized human development, administrative transparency, and social equity**. His approach to governance was not driven by imperial compulsion but by a deep-seated sense of **ethical responsibility and commitment to public welfare**.

What makes the Mysore experiment under his reign particularly remarkable is that it **preceded many of the post-independence policies** adopted by democratic India. Long before the Indian Constitution enshrined the right to education or the principle of affirmative action, Mysore under Krishnaraja Wodeyar was already implementing these ideas in practice. The **reservation policy for backward classes (1918)**, the **emphasis on girls' education**, and the **promotion of public health infrastructure** were far ahead of their time.

His collaborative governance style was further strengthened by the appointments of **visionary Dewans** like **Sir Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya**, an engineer and economist par excellence, and **Sir Mirza Ismail**, a statesman admired for his diplomatic acumen and civic development projects. Together, they laid the groundwork for Mysore's transition from a feudal territory to a **model welfare state**—complete with universities, industries, legislatures, dams, banks, and modern civic services.

This paper aims to:

1. Systematically analyze the **core reforms** introduced during Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV's reign.
2. Assess the **ideological and philosophical underpinnings** of his governance style.
3. Explore the **impact of these reforms** on subsequent regional and national development strategies.
4. Reposition the role of princely states, particularly Mysore, in the larger narrative of India's **modernization and democratization**.

In doing so, the study challenges the dominant historical portrayal of princely rulers as archaic or irrelevant in India's modern transition. Instead, it highlights how visionary leadership within a monarchic structure could, and did, contribute meaningfully to **inclusive nation-building and statecraft**.

Review of Literature

A growing body of scholarship has acknowledged the extraordinary contributions of Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV in shaping the socio-political and economic framework of modern Karnataka. Scholars have not only chronicled his reforms but also evaluated their impact in broader historical and policy contexts.

- **R.R. Diwakar** (1968), in *The Story of Mysore*, provides a comprehensive historical account of the Wodeyar dynasty. Diwakar notes how Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV transformed Mysore into one of the most advanced princely states by promoting development through a combination of tradition and rational administration.
- **Dr. D.V. Gundappa (DVG)** offers a rich narrative in his *Biography of Dewan Visvesvaraya*, where he articulates the intellectual and administrative symbiosis between the Maharaja and his Dewans. He emphasizes the monarchy's receptiveness to scientific reasoning and its willingness to implement large-scale projects like the KRS Dam.
- **James Manor** (1990), in his comparative study of princely states, observes that Mysore was among the rare exceptions where royalty collaborated with skilled administrators to deliver measurable developmental outcomes. He terms the Mysore model as a prototype of progressive monarchy.
- **M.N. Srinivas**, the renowned sociologist, in his writings on caste and modernization, explores how the early affirmative action policies under Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV laid the groundwork for India's later reservation system. He contextualizes this within the socio-cultural landscape of South India and the non-Brahmin movement.

- **A. Appadorai and B. Shiva Rao**, in their writings on Indian constitutional development, discuss Mysore's experiments with representative institutions as early examples of proto-democratic governance within monarchical settings.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant gap exists in integrating various policy dimensions—educational, industrial, constitutional, and social—into a unified framework. This study attempts to bridge that gap by offering a comprehensive evaluation of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV's reign as a **holistic governance model**.

Case Study Highlights: Major Reforms under Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV

1. Educational Reforms

- **University of Mysore (1916)**: The first university in India established by an Indian ruler, it promoted access to higher education in a region that had traditionally been deprived. The curriculum included humanities, sciences, and technical subjects, preparing graduates for modern administrative and industrial roles.
- **Girls' and Marginalized Communities' Education**: State-funded schools were set up for girls and scheduled castes. Scholarships and mid-day meals were introduced in certain areas to retain students.
- **Libraries and Adult Education**: Public libraries and night schools facilitated adult literacy, laying the groundwork for an informed citizenry.

2. Economic and Industrial Reforms

- **Mysore Iron and Steel Works (VISL, Bhadravati)**: Established in 1923 with technical backing from Visvesvaraya, this initiative positioned Mysore as a pioneer in industrial self-reliance. It created jobs, reduced dependence on imported steel, and supported railway expansion.
- **Silk and Sandalwood Industries**: Mysore silk gained national and global recognition. The state also monopolized sandalwood trade, establishing perfumeries and woodcraft centers.
- **Banking Sector**: The **State Bank of Mysore**, launched in 1913 under the aegis of Visvesvaraya, enabled savings, rural credit, and capital accumulation for state development.

3. Social Justice and Caste Reforms

- **Miller Committee and Reservation (1918)**: The Maharaja's appointment of the Miller Committee to address backward caste representation was a watershed moment. The introduction of quotas in education and government employment for non-Brahmins prefigured the constitutional provisions of post-independence India.
- **Support for Non-Brahmin Movements**: The king maintained cordial relations with Justice Party leaders and supported temple entry movements and anti-untouchability initiatives.

4. Infrastructure and Public Health

- **Krishna Raja Sagara (KRS) Dam**: Built across the Cauvery River, the dam transformed agricultural practices by irrigating hundreds of thousands of acres. It also provided drinking water to Mysore and Bangalore.
- **Public Health Initiatives**: Vaccination drives against smallpox and plague, modern sewage systems, and municipal hospitals drastically improved public health indicators.
- **Municipal Governance**: Cities like Mysore and Bangalore had early forms of elected councils that managed sanitation, water supply, and urban planning.

5. Constitutional and Administrative Reforms

- **Representative Assemblies:** Mysore introduced a Legislative Assembly in 1907, expanded to bicameral form in the 1920s. This provided a voice to citizens, though limited by property qualifications.
- **Administrative Modernization:** The recruitment of officials based on merit, especially in civil engineering and public works, streamlined governance and ensured accountability.

Importance of the Study

1. Historical Relevance

Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV's reign is a unique chapter in India's colonial-era history, where indigenous leadership achieved developmental benchmarks without full political sovereignty. Understanding this phase is crucial to revisiting our assumptions about monarchy and modernity.

2. Policy Legacy

His policies predated and inspired several elements of post-independence governance, such as state-led industrialization, affirmative action, and human development-centered planning. They serve as useful case studies for contemporary policymakers.

3. Cultural Identity

The legacy of the Wodeyars, especially Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, continues to inspire pride among the people of Karnataka. Institutions, infrastructure, and cultural symbols established during his rule form the foundation of modern Karnataka's identity.

4. Governance Model

His rule exemplifies how traditional structures like monarchy can, when guided by wisdom and ethics, nurture democratic institutions, citizen welfare, and accountable governance.

Findings and Suggestions

Findings

- Mysore under Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV outperformed many colonial provinces in health, literacy, and industrialization.
- The proactive partnership between the king and Dewans enabled efficiency and policy continuity.
- The state institutionalized welfare principles long before such models were debated in the Indian Constituent Assembly.
- The social justice initiatives, including early reservations, laid the moral foundation for future egalitarian governance in India.

Suggestions

- **Policy Emulation:** State and national governments can adapt elements of Mysore's decentralized and people-focused governance to enhance today's service delivery mechanisms.
- **Curriculum Enhancement:** Academic curricula, especially in history, political science, and public administration, should integrate the Mysore model to offer alternative pathways of modernization.

- **Archival Preservation and Public Memory:** A national museum dedicated to the Wodeyars and Mysore's reform era should be established to preserve documentation and promote civic awareness.
- **Balanced Historiography:** Historians and textbook authors should reassess the narrative around princely states to reflect the contributions of progressive rulers like Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV.

Conclusion

The reign of **Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV** stands as a testament to enlightened leadership in a period dominated by colonial subjugation and autocratic rule in other princely states. His model of governance blended the best of Indian ethical tradition and Western scientific rationalism. Far from being a passive beneficiary of colonial patronage, he used his platform to **champion education, equality, innovation, and democratic thinking**.

The long-lasting impact of his reforms is visible not just in Mysore's transformation but also in the foundations of modern Karnataka. Institutions like the University of Mysore, KRS Dam, and VISL are more than physical structures—they symbolize an era where royalty worked for the people. His legacy continues to inspire civil servants, political leaders, and citizens alike.

In revisiting his contributions, we rediscover a forgotten blueprint for governance—one that values **vision over vanity, service over status, and legacy over lineage**. Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV remains not just a progressive king, but a timeless symbol of **what ethical and visionary leadership can achieve** in nation-building.

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