

The Trajectory of the Non-Brahmin Movement in Princely Mysore (1917–1937)

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Abstract—This paper analyses the historical evolution, ideological dimensions, and structural transformations of the non-Brahmin movement in Princely Mysore from the formation of the Praja Mitra Mandali in 1917 to the ultimate merger of the Samyuktha Praja Paksha into the Mysore State Congress in 1937. Utilizing extensive documentary evidence from the text, this study demonstrates that unlike contemporary radical nativist or racialized movements in the Madras Presidency and Maharashtra, the non-Brahmin movement in Princely Mysore developed primarily around socio-economic issues, prioritizing access to administrative offices, bureaucratic representation, and state-backed educational facilities. The paper explores the appointment and socio-political impact of the Miller Committee (1918–1921), examines the internal cleavages among dominant and minor backward communities that led to the decline of early caste-political associations, and charts the structural transition from the elite-led Praja Mitra Mandali to the agrarian-focused Praja Paksha and Samyuktha Praja Paksha. Finally, it highlights how this distinct anti-monopolistic regional consciousness culminated in a comprehensive mass mobilization strategy that reshaped the nationalist landscape, culminating in a programmatic takeover of the regional Congress apparatus.

I. Introduction

The dynamics of socio-political mobilization in early twentieth-century Peninsular India were deeply coloured by the assertion of intermediate and backward communities against the historical hegemony of the Brahmin intelligentsia. However, the manifestation of this anti-monopolistic regional consciousness varied extensively across different geographical and administrative setups. While regional assertions in British India—most notably the Justice Party and subsequent Dravidian movements in the Madras Presidency—relied heavily on explicit cultural, linguistic, and racial binaries (such as the Dravidian-versus-Aryan dichotomy), the socio-political upsurge in the princely state of Mysore presented a distinct model of mobilization.

In Princely Mysore, the non-Brahmin movement emerged not as an explicit counter-cultural or anti-religious crusade against Hinduism or Brahmanism as a coherent theological system, but rather as a highly practical, material, and legal-rational struggle for economic survival, administrative representation, and educational access. Characterized by historians as a "bread and butter" agenda, the movement sought to challenge the near-monopoly of a single minority community over the state's civic administration, press, and local self-governing bodies.

This paper traces the structural and political trajectory of this movement across two crucial decades. It examines how early civic discontent crystallized into the state's first formal political apparatus, the Praja Mitra Mandali, in 1917. It details the subsequent legislative and administrative battles over the implementation of the Leslie C. Miller Committee recommendations, which sought to redefine administrative recruitment based on English literacy metrics. Furthermore, the study analyses how the absence of a deeply rooted, unifying cultural ideology, combined with inherent socio-economic discrepancies among dominant backward castes (such as the Lingayats and Vokkaligas) and minor communities, led to structural fragmentation and the subsequent decline of early communal alliances.

Finally, the paper charts the political transformation of the late 1920s and 1930s, marked by the birth of the Praja Paksha and the Samyuktha Praja Paksha. This phase shifted the movement from narrow communal job-seeking to an expansive, secular, and agrarian-oriented campaign for fully responsible constitutional government under the aegis of the Maharaja. The study culminates in an analysis of the October 1937 merger with the Mysore District Congress Committee, illustrating how the non-Brahmin movement effectively subverted the traditional urban elite leadership of the Congress, creating a powerful mechanism for mass rural mobilization.

II. The Ideological Specificity of the Mysore Non-Brahmin Upsurge

To understand the specific historical context of the non-Brahmin movement in Princely Mysore, it must be contrasted with contemporary assertions in the surrounding regions of Western and Southern India. In the Madras Presidency, as highlighted by Eugene Irschick, the non-Brahmin movement possessed deep cultural and ideological overtones. To mobilize the vast, fragmented lower-caste populations against elite domination, leaders in Tamil Nadu constructed an explicit Dravidian ideology centred around language, culture, and ancient regional identity. This framework allowed the movement to project the Brahmin-non-Brahmin conflict as an ethnic and civilizational struggle between "Aryan invaders" and "indigenous Dravidians," as demonstrated by the rhetoric of the Zamindar of Singampatti and the conceptualization of a "Dravidian Amelioration Fund". This cultural foundation provided long-term ideological sustainability, ensuring its survival from the days of the Justice Party through the Dravida Kazhagam to the modern Dravidian political parties.

Conversely, as scholar Lelah Dushkin observes, there was practically no substantial infiltration of this radical Dravidian racial identity into the Princely Mysore region. The non-Brahmin movement in Mysore did not develop a well-thought-out, ideologically coherent anti-Brahmanical platform. While individual orators occasionally expressed rhetorical frustration against upper-caste privileges in public forums, the movement consistently refrained from targeting Hinduism or traditional cultural frameworks. Instead, it remained focused on secular, material concerns: governmental jobs, state-backed education, and legislative representation.

The absence of an overarching cultural framework in Mysore meant that unity was maintained primarily through a shared desire for administrative equity. The backward classes, who collectively constituted approximately 90 percent of the total population of the princely state, were largely uneducated, rural, and underrepresented across all branches of civil governance. As socio-political awareness expanded in the early twentieth century, the educated, urban middle-class elements within these backward communities began to view the state bureaucracy as the ultimate source of social and economic advancement.

As C.R. Reddy prominently argued, public office functioned as a "social lever of the highest importance". To ensure the socio-economic advancement of the non-Brahmin population, it was essential to secure an equitable distribution of these administrative positions among the state's diverse communities. Consequently, the movement in Mysore was shaped by a practical struggle against institutional exclusion, seeking to dismantle an administrative monopoly through established legal and bureaucratic channels.

III. Early Mobilization and the Foundation of the Praja Mitra Mandali (1917–1918)

The initial stage of organized non-Brahmin mobilization in Mysore occurred in late 1917, driven by growing public discontent over the structural exclusion of the state's vast majority from public affairs. On November 18, 1917, a pivotal public meeting of the backward classes was convened in Bangalore. Presided over by Annaswami Mudaliar and attended by over 3,000 delegates representing thirty distinct caste communities, this gathering served as the first major demonstration of non-Brahmin political solidarity in the state.

In his address to the assembly, M. Basavaiah, a member of the Mysore Legislative Council, used statistical evidence to highlight the stark developmental imbalances within the state. He demonstrated that a single minority community, representing a fraction of the population, held a virtual monopoly over higher education, local boards, municipalities, representative bodies, and the civil service. This concentrated influence effectively disenfranchised the remaining 90 percent of the population. Basavaiah observed:

"The political voice of the ninety percent of the people was almost nothing compared with the development of one community which had monopolized it. Such a difference was seen in all the stages of administration from the village to the highest council."

This elite monopoly extended beyond the civil service into the press, manufacturing sectors, and commercial enterprises. To counter this concentration of influence, early leaders called for a unified platform based on communal representation. They argued that the state should be governed through an inclusive relationship between the sovereign Maharaja and his people, rather than an exclusive administrative oligarchy.

To institutionalize these demands, prominent leaders including H. Channaiah, M. Basavaiah, Mohammed Abdul Kalami, D. Banumaiah, Mohammad Abbas Khan, and M. Subbaiah formally founded the Praja Mitra Mandali on December 6, 1917. Operating as the first formal political organization in Princely Mysore, the Mandali established an executive committee with H. Channaiah as President and M. Basavaiah as Organizing Secretary.

The primary strategy of the Praja Mitra Mandali relied on constitutional petitions and institutional advocacy. On June 24, 1918, a formal deputation from the Mandali secured an audience with the Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnarajendra Wodeyar, to present a comprehensive memorandum. This document detailed the structural disadvantages faced by rural populations due to gaps in the educational system and urged the state to implement preference systems for non-Brahmins in public appointments. The memorandum advanced several key institutional demands:

- The restructuring of all public bodies, from the Legislative Council down to local boards, to ensure balanced communal representation.
- The allocation of government offices among different communities to maintain an equitable institutional balance and incentivize education across all social classes.
- A temporary ban on importing outside candidates for public offices when qualified local options were available, aiming to break the entrenched bureaucratic monopoly.
- The annual publication of updated government surveys detailing the precise representation of various communities within the public services.

The Maharaja responded positively to the petition, reaffirming his administration's commitment to supporting the state's backward communities. The government subsequently introduced targeted measures, including reserving seats in state schools, expanding scholarship funds, and establishing hostel facilities for backward and depressed classes.

Even during the administration of Dewan Sir M. Visveswaraya, the state expanded primary educational infrastructure for these groups. In 1916, the government issued a directive stating that underrepresented communities should receive 25 percent of all annual departmental and district appointments, alongside relaxed qualifications for local administrative roles like *Amildars* and *Sheikdars*. However, these early initiatives were often hindered by institutional inertia and opposition from the established bureaucracy, underscoring the need for a comprehensive structural review of state recruitment policies.

IV. The Miller Committee Recommendations and Bureaucratic Conflict

In August 1918, the Government of Mysore appointed a special committee chaired by Chief Judge Leslie C. Miller to address these persistent institutional imbalances. The committee included prominent figures such as C. Srikanteswara Iyer, M. Muthanna, M.C. Ranga Iyengar, H. Chennaiah, Gulam Ahmed

Kalami, and M. Basavaiah. Formally titled *"The committee appointed to consider steps necessary for the adequate Representation of Backward communities in the public service,"* its work focused on three main areas:

- Developing modifications for existing public service recruitment frameworks.
- Formulating special facilities to encourage higher and professional education among backward class students.
- Designing targeted measures to increase backward community representation without compromising administrative efficiency.

Submitted in July 1919, the Miller Committee Report introduced an analytical shift by using literacy in English as the primary metric for defining social advancement. Under this framework, only Brahmins and native English speakers were classified as "forward," while all other groups were categorized as "backward". To simplify administration, the committee divided the state's population into three broad categories: (1) Brahmins, (2) other caste Hindus, Mohammedans, and Indian Christians, and (3) the Depressed Classes.

The report proposed a transition: within seven years, non-Brahmin communities were to hold at least 50 percent of higher administrative positions and two-thirds of lower-grade appointments. This framework was formally adopted through a government order in May 1921.

The publication and subsequent enactment of these recommendations triggered a sharp debate within Mysore's political and legislative bodies. Traditional civil servants and conservative legislators strongly opposed the measures, delaying the implementation of the report for nearly two years. When the government moved to finalize the order in May 1921, Brahmin representatives staged a boycott of the Representative Assembly. This action drew sharp criticism from Dewan M. Kantharaj Urs, who described the walkout as an ill-advised move that threatened the integrity of the state's representative institutions.

During the assembly's October session, the Dewan sought to reassure critics by clarifying that the policy focused primarily on initial appointments and would not completely exclude forward-caste candidates. He emphasized that the measure was designed to gradually raise non-Brahmin representation to a more balanced level, framing it as a matter of basic justice for the vast majority of the Maharaja's subjects. He challenged upper-caste leaders to view the policy through the lens of long-term social cohesion rather than narrow group interests.

Despite these assurances, upper-caste representatives continued to challenge the institutional validity of the reservation policy. Opponents like K.T. Seshaiah argued that the civil service should function strictly as an efficiency-driven meritocracy rather than a representative body based on communal quotas. He asserted that contemporary governance models globally recognized individual qualifications rather than community background.

Other critics, such as R. Gopalaswamy Iyer, defended the status quo through market concepts like supply and demand, pointing out that their community had consistently supplied the educated labor required by the state. Meanwhile, legislators like H. Krishna Sastry invoked traditional divisions of labour, arguing that national prosperity relied on different social classes maintaining distinct occupational roles, with higher administration remaining the domain of the traditionally literate classes.

In contrast, non-Brahmin representatives maintained that formal reservations were essential to provide their communities with a tangible incentive to pursue higher education. Major caste organizations, including the Vokkaligara Sangha and the Lingayat Education Fund Association, strongly endorsed the reforms, praising both the Miller Committee Report and Dr. C.R. Reddy's Education Memorandum as landmark steps toward a more equitable state policy.

V. Internal Cleavages and the Decline of Early Caste Alliances

While the push for the Miller Committee recommendations initially unified the non-Brahmin coalition, the actual implementation of the reforms revealed deep-seated internal divisions. Once concrete administrative quotas were established, the broad "non-Brahmin" category began to fragment along specific caste and communal lines. The dominant agrarian and trading communities—most notably the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats—secured a significant share of the newly available public positions. Between June 1921 and November 1926, out of 4,238 total public service appointments, the Lingayats, Muslims, and Vokkaligas combined to claim 1,485 posts. In contrast, all other minor backward communities together received 1,338 posts, while Brahmin candidates retained 1,415 positions.

This uneven distribution caused growing dissatisfaction among smaller groups, such as the Kurubas, who felt that the primary benefits of the reservation policy were being monopolized by the more influential non-Brahmin communities. Concurrently, minor groups like Christians, Muslims, and the Depressed Classes began to feel that their long-term interests would be better protected by maintaining distinct identities rather than remaining part of a generalized non-Brahmin coalition. This fragmentation confirmed warnings from contemporary critics who had predicted that communal quotas would eventually lead to internal competition over state appointments.

These internal strains were further complicated by broader political transitions within the state administration. Following a long period of Brahmin occupancy in the Dewanship up to 1918, the appointment of subsequent Dewans—including M. Kantha Raj Urs (1918–1922), Sir Albion Banerji (1922–1926), and Sir Mirza Ismail (1926–1941)—marked a shift away from traditional monopoly control. Under Dewan Mirza Ismail, the representation of Muslims within the state bureaucracy grew steadily, which unintentionally aggravated divisions between Muslim and non-Muslim members of the backward classes' coalition. Traditional elites sought to leverage these growing communal tensions to weaken the non-Brahmin alliance.

A prominent flashpoint occurred during the October 1927 Dasara festival, when the Maharaja broke with tradition by inviting Dewan Mirza Ismail to ride with him in the royal howdah during the public procession through Mysore City. This highly visible sign of royal favor toward a non-Hindu Dewan provoked significant opposition among conservative groups, culminating in public protests and attempts to disrupt the procession. These incidents exacerbated existing communal divisions, making it increasingly difficult for early non-Brahmin organizations to maintain a unified front.

VI. The Rise of Praja Paksha and the Samyuktha Praja Paksha (1929–1935)

Recognizing that narrow communal advocacy was no longer sufficient, a new generation of non-Brahmin leaders sought to reposition the movement within a broader political framework. In 1929, a comprehensive conference of leading political figures led to the creation of a new organization called the Praja Paksha. While its core membership reflected earlier backward-class coalitions, the Praja Paksha made a significant structural departure by formally opening its ranks to all communities and adopting a secular, democratic platform. The party shifted its primary focus away from simple bureaucratic job-seeking toward a broader constitutional goal: establishing a fully responsible, elected representative government in Mysore under the constitutional authority of the Maharaja.

The Praja Paksha quickly built a strong institutional base by actively contesting local government elections. In the 1930 District Board elections, the party achieved a major breakthrough, winning the presidency in seven out of the state's eight districts. These local bodies provided non-Brahmin leaders with a valuable platform for practical governance, enabling them to oversee rural infrastructure projects, expand regional health centres, and improve water access across semi-urban and rural areas.

This local administrative experience served as a training ground for self-government and helped build deep connections with the rural electorate. As these District Board presidents increasingly dedicated themselves to full-time political organization, the Praja Paksha's broad-based campaign for constitutional reform rapidly eclipsed the older, elite-led Praja Mitra Mandali.

To resolve the confusion of having two separate non-Brahmin organizations operating with similar ultimate goals, the Praja Mitra Mandali and the Praja Paksha formally merged in 1935 to form the Samyuktha Praja Paksha (also known as the People's Federation). This unified entity introduced major organizational innovations, most notably a systematic effort to mobilize the rural population by establishing *Ryots* (peasant) conferences across every taluk in the state. This strategy directly connected the constitutional campaign for responsible government with concrete agrarian concerns.

At its first full conference in Hassan, held under the presidency of K.C. Reddy, the Samyuktha Praja Paksha adopted a dual approach. It simultaneously demanded immediate constitutional reforms alongside clear protections for backward community representation within the public services, effectively uniting the state's rural and urban reform movements.

VII. Strategic Integration: The 1937 Merger and the Transformation of Nationalist Politics

While the Samyuktha Praja Paksha was expanding its base across Mysore's rural and urban areas, the Indian National Congress operated through a separate organizational track. The Mysore District Congress Committee (MDCC) had been established in 1921 under the presidency of S.S. Setlur, an ex-judge of the Chief Court of Mysore.

During its early years, the MDCC focused almost exclusively on the constructive programs authorized by the national Congress leadership, such as promoting hand-spinning (*Khadi*) and supporting local development initiatives. In line with directives from the broader National Congress, the local committee avoided direct involvement in regional political disputes or agitations against the princely administration, keeping its operations largely confined to urban centres.

This division created a distinct political landscape: the urban, elite-led Congress committee focused primarily on national constructive programs, while the Samyuktha Praja Paksha possessed a powerful, widespread organization capable of mobilizing both rural and urban constituencies around regional political grievances. Because both organizations ultimately sought the establishment of responsible representative government, leaders recognized that combining their forces would significantly strengthen the democratic movement.

In October 1937, the Samyuktha Praja Paksha and the Mysore District Congress Committee formally merged to establish the 'Mysore State Congress'. This integration fundamentally altered the leadership dynamics and social composition of nationalist politics in the state. By bringing its extensive network of rural supporters and local board leaders into the new organization, the Samyuktha Praja Paksha effectively assumed organizational leadership of the regional Congress apparatus.

This structural transition significantly diluted the traditional political dominance of the urban elite within nationalist forums. By uniting the non-Brahmin movement's focus on socio-economic equity with the broader institutional weight of the national movement, the 1937 merger transformed the struggle for responsible government in Mysore into a powerful, unified mass campaign.

VIII. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of the non-Brahmin movement in Princely Mysore demonstrates a distinct path of socio-political mobilization that contrasts with the culturally oriented non-Brahmin movements found elsewhere in contemporary Southern and Western India. From its origins in the public meetings of late 1917 and the subsequent formation of the Praja Mitra Mandali, the movement focused primarily on material and structural objectives: securing equitable access to public education, breaking elite monopolies within the civil service, and establishing fair communal representation within state institutions. The administrative battles surrounding the Leslie C. Miller Committee recommendations highlighted how central bureaucratic access was to the socio-economic strategies of intermediate and backward communities.

While the lack of an overarching cultural or linguistic ideology left the early movement vulnerable to internal caste rivalries and fragmentation, it also facilitated a rapid transition toward a more inclusive, secular political

framework. The rise of the Praja Paksha and the Samyuktha Praja Paksha marked a vital evolution from localized communal advocacy to a broad-based campaign for constitutional reform and agrarian mobilization.

By successfully building power within local district boards and championing peasant interests, these organizations constructed a robust political apparatus. This development culminated in the October 1937 merger with the Congress, an event that effectively integrated the non-Brahmin movement's focus on social equity into the broader nationalist campaign for self-determination. This strategic integration ultimately reshaped the social and political landscape of modern Karnataka, leaving a lasting legacy of institutional inclusion and democratic governance.

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