

The Cultural Aesthetic of Mysore: An Exploration of Royal Patronage

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Abstract : *This paper attempts to explore the cultural aesthetic of Mysore through the lens of royal patronage. The city flourished as a hub of art, poetry, and music under the patronage of the Wodeyars. Known as the City of Palaces, Mysore is home to a rich tapestry of museums, art galleries, and cultural celebrations, notably the world-renowned Dasara festival. Playing a pivotal role in shaping the cultural richness of Mysore, the steadfast support and encouragement of the Wodeyars across various fields fostered the development of a unique aesthetic known as the 'Mysore Style,' evident in painting, architecture, music and poetry. Mysore painting, flourished under Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar. Murals from his reign adorn temples, known for their vibrant reds and greens. The royal family supported temple construction, embellishments, sculpture, and performing arts. Mysore was a centre for Carnatic music, the royal family themselves being accomplished musicians. Bharatanatyam, which faced decline during colonial rule, was revived under royal patronage. Performances in temples and at the palace were integral to court culture. Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV was instrumental in establishing institutions like the Chamarajendra Academy of Visual Arts and Mysore University. Mysore art and crafts gained global recognition through world exhibitions, often sponsored by the royal family, which helped preserve and promote local traditions. The royal court's efforts ensured the survival and growth of Mysore's rich cultural heritage while adapting to modern influences, making the region a vibrant centre of artistic and intellectual activity. Employing archival materials, this study attempts to trace the crafting of an enduring aesthetic identity by the Wodeyars who incorporated indigenous traditions with modern influences.*

Key Words : The Wodeyars, Royal patronage, Mysore style, Cultural celebrations , Dasara festival

INTRODUCTION:

Mysore, historically known as "Mahishur," derives its name from the mythological tale of Goddess Chamundeshwari's victory over the demon Mahishasura. (C.D Narasimhaiah, 1991)

Mysore, hailed as the cultural capital of Karnataka, is a city that seamlessly blends historical significance with natural and architectural heritage. Once the capital of the Wodeyar dynasty, when Raja Wodeyar strategically rose to power and subsequently established Srirangapatna as the center of Mysore's political and cultural activities, the transition from Vijayanagara to Mysore marking a pivotal moment in South Indian history, demonstrating the continuity and transformation of power structures and cultural traditions. (Shivapriyananda, 1995), the Wodeyars ruling Mysore kingdom for centuries, the city flourished as a hub of art, poetry, and music under their patronage. Known as the City of Palaces, Mysore is home to a rich tapestry of museums, art galleries, and cultural celebrations, most notably the world-renowned Dasara festival. (Swamy, C., & Shankar, B. 2012)

During Dasara, an image of Goddess Chamundeshwari is placed in a golden mantapa atop a beautifully adorned elephant and paraded through the city. This grand procession features tableaux, dance troupes, music bands, and a spectacular torchlight parade, alongside decorated elephants, horses, and camels.

Mysore's legacy extends beyond its festivals, lending its name to iconic culinary delights like Mysore Pak and Mysore Masala Dosa, exquisite Mysore silk saris, and the traditional Mysore painting style. The city's architectural splendor is unparalleled, characterized by a harmonious blend of four distinct styles: Indo-Saracenic, Traditional Hindu, Greco-Roman, and Gothic. Complemented by the picturesque Chamundi Hill, serene lakes, verdant parks, and open spaces, Mysore's aesthetic charm is undeniable.

Recognizing its unique cultural and architectural heritage, the Government of Karnataka has designated Mysore as a Heritage City.

OBJECTIVES :

The prime objective of this study is

1. To examine how royal patronage helped in shaping the cultural aesthetic of Mysore,
2. To explore the role of the Wodeyars in the contribution towards arts, architecture and education and
3. To investigate the function of the royal family in sustaining cultural modernity rooted in tradition and shaping Mysore's contemporary cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW :

The Wodeyars were distinguished patrons of art and culture, playing a pivotal role in shaping the cultural

richness of Mysore (*Payments made to Sangeetha Vidwans who came to Mysore during birthday and Dasara festivities*, 1907, pg-117).. Their unwavering support and encouragement across various fields fostered the development of a unique aesthetic known as the “Mysore Style,” evident in painting, architecture, music, poetry, and more.

This underlines that the patronage of the Wodeyars contributed to the introduction of the aesthetic Mysore style.

FESTIVALS OF MYSORE UNDER ROYAL PATRONAGE :

The festivals of Mysore serve as a vibrant testament to the cultural unity of its diverse population. Despite being home to people of varied faiths and beliefs, Mysore provides a shared cultural platform where numerous social festivals are celebrated collectively. Among these, the Dasara festival stands out as a grand and joyous occasion, marked by the spirited participation and enthusiasm of the city's residents. (Swamy, C., & Shankar, B. 2012). At the heart of mother goddess worship lies the desire to honor and appease the forces of nature, seeking their blessings for growth and fertility. The nine-day autumnal festival of Navaratri represents an elaborate and structured expression of this fertility and thanksgiving tradition. (Shivapriyananda, 1995) This reveals that Dasara, the cultural celebration became markedly the most renowned due to the significant patronage of the Wodeyars of Mysore (*Arrangements for the Dasara Durbar: payment of travelling allowance to Sheristedar*, 1911, pg-6).

MYSORE PAINTING :

Following the disintegration of the Vijayanagara Empire, a distinct style of painting known as Mysore painting emerged. Raja Wodeyar is remembered for his patronage and support of artists, commissioning captivating illustrations on the walls of temples and palaces. He also constructed two shrines dedicated to Goddess Nimishamba Devi, one at Srirangapatna and the other at Ganjam, a deity highly revered by artists. Mysore painting flourished under Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, who commissioned over a thousand portraits, many displayed at Jagan Mohan Palace. Murals from his reign adorn temples like Prasanna Krishnaswamy and Shwetha Varaha Swamy, known for their vibrant reds and greens. He also encouraged artists like Narayanappa and Chinnakrishnappa to create self-portraits, immortalizing them in gesso art.

ARCHITECTURE OF MYSORE :

The Mysore Palace is an example of Indo-Saracenic architecture, blending traditional Indian, Islamic, and European styles. The royal family also supported temple construction and embellishments, (*Improvements to the Sri Chamundeswari temple*, 1908, pg-20). Mysore kings promoted literary activities in both Sanskrit and Kannada. Scholars like Lakshmisha, who composed *Jaimini Bharata*, were supported by the court. (Sampath, V, 2008) During the reign of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV and Jayachamaraja Wodeyar, the court encouraged modern Kannada literature. Writers like Masti Venkatesha Iyengar and Kuvempu benefited from royal encouragement.

This emphasizes that the Royal patronage extended to various art forms, including painting, sculpture, and performing arts.

MUSIC UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF THE WODEYARS:

Mysore was a centre for Carnatic music, and the

royal family themselves were accomplished musicians. Jayachamaraja Wodeyar was a renowned composer of Carnatic kritis. Bharatanatyam, which faced decline during colonial rule, was revived under royal patronage. Performances in temples and at the palace were integral to court culture (*Petition of Moogupoota Kususani, a dancing girl in Mysore for presents*, 1910, pg-12). Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV was instrumental in establishing institutions like the Chamarajendra Academy of Visual Arts and Mysore University (Sampath, V, 2008).

This reflects the pivotal role of Royal family in promoting the cultural aesthetics of Mysore.

Mysore art and crafts gained global recognition through world exhibitions, often sponsored by the royal family, which helped preserve and promote local traditions. The royal court's efforts ensured the survival and growth of Mysore's rich cultural heritage while adapting to modern influences, making the region a vibrant centre of artistic and intellectual activity.

Methodology used was archival research, where the royal inscriptions, palace records, and official documents available in archives like the Mysore Palace Library and the Karnataka State Archives were referred to and analysed to comprehend the patronage of the maharajas for festivals like dasara, temples and artists. Analysis of important texts related to the topic like Vikram Sampath's The splendours of Royal Mysore: The untold story of the Wodeyars, C D Narasimhaiah's N for Nobody and Swami Shivapriyananda's Royal Mysore Dasara threw light on the cultural heritage through the patronage of the royal court. Field visits also formed a part of the methodology which included visit to Mysore palace to observe the architectural aesthetics, murals, and artifacts that embody royal patronage, to study inscriptions and royal portraits, visit to Jaganmohan Art Gallery to analyse collections of paintings, sculptures, and other artworks patronised by the Wodeyars, visit to Tipu's summer palace at Srirangapatna to explore Tipu's contribution and visit to Chamundeshwari Temple to understand the integration of religious aesthetics with royal rituals.

The Wodeyar dynasty established in 1399 by Yaduraya, marked the transition from smaller regional chieftains to centralized governance. Mysore's strategic location in southern Karnataka made it an important cultural and trade hub. Initially, the kingdom was a vassal state of the Vijayanagara Empire. After the empire's decline following the Battle of Talikota in 1565, Mysore asserted greater independence. (Sampath, V, 2008).

Hyder Ali who ruled from 1761–1782 emerged as a powerful military leader, effectively sidelining the Wodeyars and taking control of Mysore's administration. His son, Tipu Sultan ruled from 1782–1799, continued to consolidate power, emphasizing modern military strategies, European-style reforms, and the development of a strong navy. Political and economic strategies under Hyder Ali and Tipu used political and economic strategies which included expansionist policies, leading to conflicts with the Marathas, Nizam of Hyderabad, and the British East India Company. Development of industries, particularly in silk, arms manufacturing, and agriculture, establishing Mysore as a center of trade, especially in sandalwood, spices, and textiles. modernizing irrigation systems and introducing revenue reforms. Tipu's resistance against British colonial expansion

culminated in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War in 1799, resulting in his defeat and death (Sampath,V.2008). After Tipu's fall, the British reinstated the Wodeyar dynasty under indirect rule. Despite political constraints, the Wodeyars focused on cultural patronage, supporting arts, literature, and religious institutions. Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV was called Rajarishi by Mahatma Gandhi, which remained with him forever. During his reign, industries like Mysore Sandalwood Oil Factory and Mysore Iron and Steel Works were established, KRS Dam was developed which revolutionized irrigation and power supply, literacy and higher education was focused, leading to the establishment of the University of Mysore in 1916.

MYSORE : A BLEND OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY :

This accentuates how Mysore royalty stands out for its balance of tradition and modernity, fostering a unique blend of cultural, economic, and political achievements. Their progressive governance continues to inspire administrative models in contemporary India.

The colonizers had their impact on the culture of Mysore . The British administration prioritized English education, leading to the establishment of numerous English-medium schools and higher education institutions. This shift facilitated the introduction of Western literature, science, and administrative practices, broadening the intellectual horizons of Mysore's populace (Sampath,V.2008). British architectural styles left an indelible mark on Mysore's cityscape. A notable example is the Mysore Palace, reconstructed in 1912 in the Indo-Saracenic style under the guidance of English architect Henry Irwin. The palace showcases a blend of English, Hindu, Muslim, and Indian architectural motifs, reflecting the syncretic design aesthetics of the period. The era of printing, heralded by missionaries, led to the publication of ancient and contemporary Kannada books, a Kannada-language Bible, and newspapers, fostering a more informed and literate society. Western techniques like oil painting and portraiture gained prominence, often blending with traditional styles. Raja Ravi Varma's work is the quintessence of this synthesis.(Sampath,V.2008). The British legal framework and missionary influence encouraged reforms in caste practices, untouchability, and women's rights. English education fostered a generation of writers who contributed to Indian English literature.

The Wodeyars progressive outlook to global influences, seen in their patronage of Western education, arts, and architecture, contributed to Mysore's cosmopolitan nature , which persists in its embrace of modernity while respecting tradition .

The palaces, temples, and monuments of Mysore like Mysore Palace and Krishnaraja sagar dam , symbolize the Wodeyars power, blending traditional Indian aesthetics with colonial influences to assert their identity as modern yet rooted in heritage. Colonial authorities introduced Western artistic techniques, such as oil painting, as symbols of civilization, reshaping local artistic practices. The integration of diverse cultural expressions like music, dance, and poetry emphasized the king's role as a patron of arts and culture, fostering unity among different sections of society.(Shivapriyananda,1995). Ritual worship of deities like Ganesha, Chamundeshwari, and Saraswati indicates the intertwine of religious devotion and governance (*Allowances to Bestars who accompanied their highness to Rathotsava on the*

Chamundi Hill, drowning of a Gadekar of Gageshab in the Chattanaballi Kattey,1910,pg-25) The ChandiHoma and sacrifices were powerful religious acts that emphasize the king's role as a political leader and a custodian of dharma. Dashami durbar was held in the palace where the goddess of banni tree, Banni Mahakali was petitioned to bless the royal family, followed by placing the royal sword before goddess Chamundeshwari. which concluded the celebration as done during the time of Raja Wodeyar in Srirangapattana(Shivapriyananda,1995).

The incorporation of various cultural expressions underlines the king's role as a patron of arts and culture.

CONTEMPORARY MYSORE :

Contemporary Mysore continues to be a hub for classical arts, with institutions like the **Kalamandira** and **Rangayana** promoting traditional and modern performances. The continuation of rituals like the Dasara procession and Jamboosavari reflects the seamless integration of royal traditions into public life. Iconic structures like the **Mysore Palace**, **Lalitha Mahal**, and **Jaganmohan Palace** are enduring symbols of the city's royal past. These monuments continue to attract tourists, contributing to the economy

Mysore's rich musical legacy thrives today, blending classical and modern influences. The annual Dasara festival showcases classical music through performances by renowned artists, alongside concerts and dance events. Institutions like the University of Mysore, Karnataka College of Music, and Sri Jayachamarajendra College of Fine Arts sustain and innovate within the city's classical tradition. Despite modernization, Mysore remains a vibrant hub for classical and contemporary music. (Sampath, 2008).

Dance was an essential element of all festivities at the Mysore palace. In addition to Dasara, GaneshaChaturthi was another significant occasion when dancers showcased their skills. KanthiravaWodeyar set up a Bharatanatyam school in Srirangapatna while ChikkadevarajaWodeyar wrote two dance dramas, GeetaGopala and Saptopadaki..The practice of integrating dance into celebrations and public functions continues to be a vital part of Mysore's cultural life, keeping alive a tradition that dates back to the royal courts.

From modern-day Dasara and GaneshaChaturthi festivities to formal events and educational institutions, dance remains a key element of Mysore's cultural identity due to the royal patronage

The tradition of Mysore painting, which flourished during the reign of MummadiKrishnarajaWodeyar, continues to be an essential part of Mysore's cultural heritage in contemporary society. Several art schools and institutions in the city, such as the **Chamarajendra Academy of Visual Arts** (CAVA), offer specialized courses in Mysore painting. These schools continue the legacy of the Wodeyar era by training new generations of artists in the traditional techniques, including the use of natural pigments, gesso and gold leaf. Many contemporary artists in Mysore are inspired by the detailed and vibrant techniques of Mysore painting.

Their work continues to draw from the themes of royal portraiture and religious iconography.

The culture of a region is deeply connected to the festivals celebrated by its people, as these events convey significant messages to society. One such festival symbolizes

the victory of good over evil, while also highlighting the invincibility and power of the Divine feminine energy that sustains and protects the universe. Dasara, celebrated as 'Nada Habba' or the State Festival in Karnataka, continues to be observed to this day, harking back to its roots as the state festival of the former Wodeyar Royal Family.

The Mysore Dasara festival, while rooted in its regal origins, has successfully transitioned into a celebration of the people, blending tradition with modern sensibilities (Ota,N,2022). The elephants, the royal family, and the grandeur of the golden howdah continue to symbolize the festival's essence, creating a cultural continuity that reverberates deeply with the people of Mysore and beyond. Through its evolving practices, Dasara remains not just a historical spectacle but a living, dynamic celebration of Karnataka's identity. The Wodeyars' promotion of Kannada as a cultural and administrative language has embedded a strong sense of regional identity in Mysore. Contemporary events, such as Kannada Rajyotsava, celebrate this legacy of linguistic pride.

Mysore's handicrafts, silk, and sandalwood industries thrive as symbols of its royal past, supporting local livelihoods and contributing to its identity.

The architectural grandeur and beauty of Mysorean monuments, particularly those from the modern era, vividly reflect the refined aesthetic sensibilities of the rulers who commissioned them. Among these remarkable structures, the Mysore Palace stands out with its majestic splendor and distinctive elegance.

Every Sunday night in Mysore, the palace is illuminated with vibrant, multicolored lights that cast a magical glow over the streets, captivating tourists who gather in the city center to admire the spectacle. The descendant of the former Maharajah of Mysore retains the privilege of residing in a portion of this magnificent palace (Ikegame,2007).

Mysore city's development can be aligned with the elaboration of an aesthetic imperialism that was evident in the kinds of public and private structures that were built during the colonial period. (Nair,J. 2020)

The royal court of Mysore serves as an interesting example of how religion, art, and statecraft were deeply interwoven to sustain and legitimize monarchical power, especially under the Wodeyar dynasty. The Wodeyars cultivated their identity as rulers with divine sanction, presenting themselves as devotees of Chamundeshwari, the presiding deity of Mysore. Chamundi Hill, home to the Chamundeshwari Temple, stood as a physical and spiritual symbol of the kingdom. The royal family's patronage of this sacred site symbolized their custodianship of both the land and its spiritual heritage (Simmons.C, 2018). The Wodeyar dynasty's patronage in Mysore exemplifies the intricate interplay between power, identity, and aesthetics. Their support for the arts not only reinforced their sovereignty but also shaped a distinct cultural identity for the region. Through their patronage, the Wodeyars cultivated a unique cultural identity for Mysore. They supported classical music, dance, and the distinctive Mysore style of Bharatanatyam, fostering a milieu where arts flourished.(Sampath,V.2008) This cultural vibrancy attracted artists and scholars nationwide, reinforcing Mysore's status as a cultural hub.

The Wodeyars' patronage illustrates how power can

influence aesthetics to shape cultural identity. Their strategic support for the arts not only legitimized their rule but also left an inefaceable mark on Mysore's cultural and aesthetic landscape.

The Wodeyar dynasty significantly modernized Mysore through various administrative and economic reforms. They implemented land revenue reforms, promoted cottage industries, and developed transportation infrastructure. Notably, in 1902, they established Asia's then-largest hydroelectric power station at Shivanasamudra, known as the Sir K. Seshadri Iyer Power Station, which played a pivotal role in electrifying the region.

The Wodeyars' focus on planned urban development, seen in initiatives like wide roads, parks, and civic amenities, laid the foundation for Mysore's reputation as a clean and well-organized city. Mysore's modern identity as a Heritage City owes much to these planning principles.

The patronage of Wodeyars has a major role in the nomenclature of Mysore as a heritage city.

CONCLUSION :

The royal court of Mysore, with its patronage of art, culture, and traditions, played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of the region. From the promotion of classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam to the institutionalization of festivals like Dasara, the royal family's influence is still evident in the cultural practices of contemporary Mysore. The court's role in preserving and nurturing various artistic traditions, fostering education, and supporting the religious and cultural festivals continues to resonate today, ensuring that Mysore's unique heritage is not only celebrated but also actively integrated into modern-day cultural expressions. The royal patronage served as a foundation for a rich cultural amalgamation, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to thrive in the vibrant practices and traditions of Mysore's contemporary society. The Wodeyar dynasty is held in high esteem in Mysore, with their enduring legacy evident in the city's landmarks and cultural traditions. Their contributions have significantly shaped Mysore's identity, leaving an indelible mark on its heritage. The legacy of royal patronage in Mysore is a testament to the Wodeyars' vision of combining tradition with progress. This legacy continues to shape the city's identity, influencing its cultural richness, architectural grandeur, economic vitality, and social fabric. Contemporary Mysore thrives as a city where the echoes of its royal past harmonize with the aspirations of modernity, making it a unique cultural and intellectual centre in India.

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