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# Emblem to Edifice

## Tracing the Aesthetics of Power from Regal Mysore to Political Mysuru

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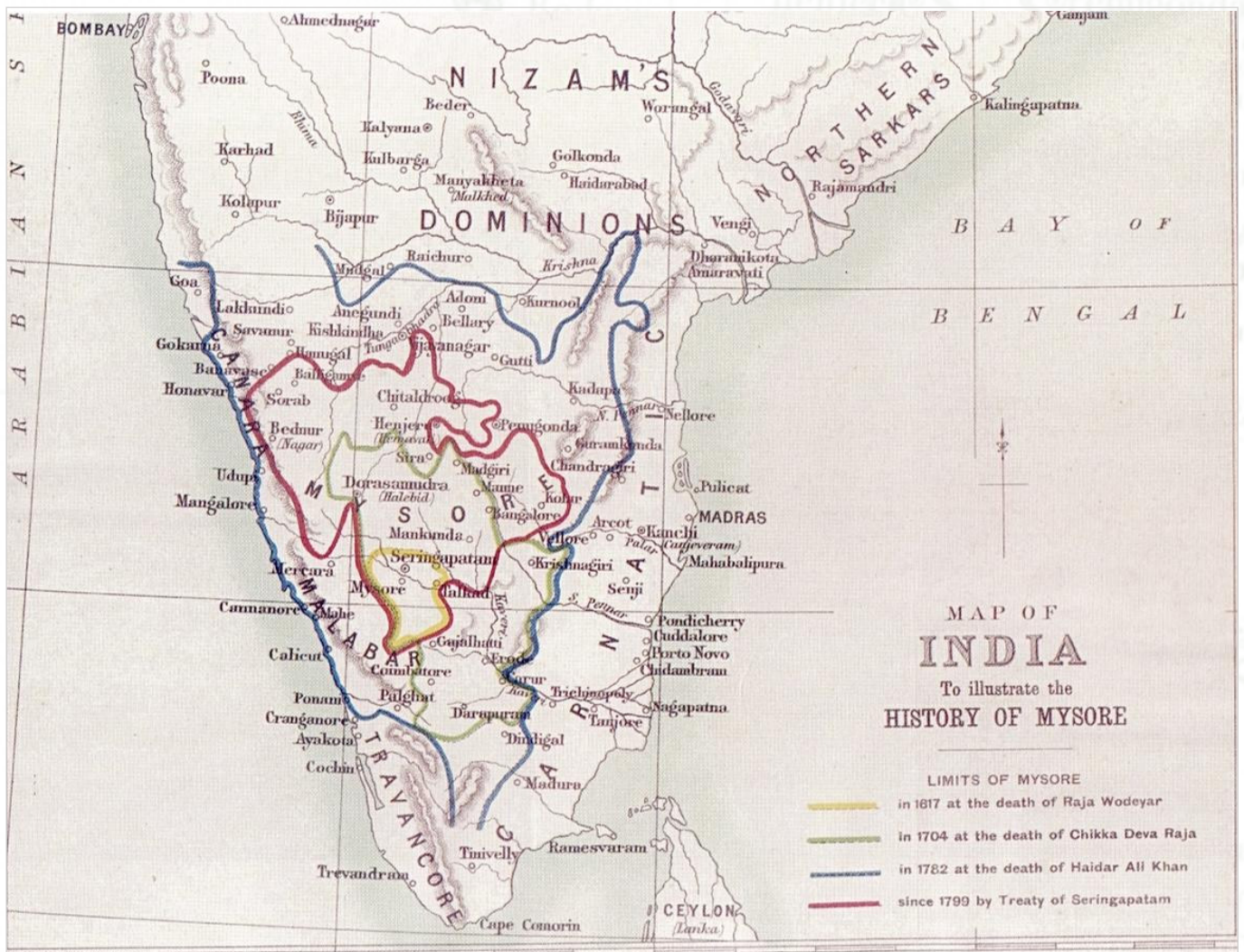


Figure 1. Map illustrating the changing boundaries of Mysore

## Introduction

The erstwhile kingdom of Mysore in South India continues to capture the imaginations of artists, architects, historians, tourists and politicians for its glorious cultural heritage emerging from its complex regional, national and international power dynamics. This article employs art historical and iconological frameworks to investigate Mysore's regal aesthetics through tracing its evolution and appropriation that evoke symbolisms of power, legacy and legitimacy. Focusing on the visuality and semiotics of palace art and architecture during the Wadiyar dynasty's rule, I aim to examine the aesthetics of self-representational power. The argument for Mysore's necessary visual instrumentalities as a 'theatre state', like the annual royal pageantry, under colonial rule will further examine artworks of its colonial portrayals. I will draw upon several case studies from the early modern period to contemporary times, focusing on the artistic and architectural productions portraying Mysore as a seat of power through the perspectives of native rulers, colonial power and today's bureaucrats.

The Palace Dasara continues to render a familiar aesthetic by reappropriating the legacy of Mysuru as a princely state, which has endured centuries of transformation. In the first half, this paper will explore the codification of meanings in the regal aesthetics of the Dasara festival, representing the power vested in the Mysore Maharajas. The second segment will trace the evolution of these meanings, which have visually transmigrated to illustrate the power of the Mysore State after Indian Independence. I will conclude my argument by tracing the vestiges of Wadiyar's legacy, focusing on the palace and its contemporary use in the optics of power by the State of Karnataka.

### Mysore to Mysuru: What is in a name?

The city of Mysore today is a quaint historical city in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, a place of pride and belonging for its residents. It traces its etymological roots as *Mahisūru* in the fifteenth century in Kannada records (Rao, n.d., p.21). Ancient legends attribute this land to *Mahisha*, the demon king who terrorised that land and was slayed by *Chamundeshwari*, a feminine manifestation of goddess *Durga* (Sampath, 2008, p.27). *Mahisūru* became Mysore (an Anglic version of the name), where *ooru* means a 'town' (Kannada). The medieval Kingdom of Mysore wielded significant power in the Deccan for around 600 years until it became a part of independent India. Today, Mysore is a metropolitan city known for its cultural and linguistic importance to the people of Karnataka.

As the Kingdom of Mysore transitioned into the 'State of Mysore' after the 25th Maharaja signed the instrument of accession to the Indian Union in 1947, its borders expanded on the linguistic basis of the Kannada-speaking population in the region. Later, the name was politically changed to the 'State of Karnataka' in 1973 owing to pressures of the identity of a more expanded demography. In 2014, further linguistic and political pressures resulted in the official renaming of Mysore to Mysuru. Although these names are easily interchanged and loosely used to denote the glory of the kingdom that once was, Mysore remains an emotion in the hearts of her people beyond regal, regional and political tussles.

### The Wadiyars: A Disrupted Lineage

This section will briefly highlight the political history of the Wadiyar lineage and its discontinuous relation to the seat of power in Mysore. By tracing the monarchs' direct rule in the pre-colonial period and their later indirect rule under colonial times, I aim to situate the subsequent political and aesthetic developments that influenced early modern Mysore and its cultural productions.

*History of Mysore and The Yadava Dynasty* accords the establishment of the Wadiyar Dynasty in 1399 to Yaduraya. It traces his title to the fact that Karnataka was a vassal state of the mighty Vijayanagara Empire in medieval times (Joyser, 1959, p.27). Mysore became increasingly powerful and gained autonomy after nearly three centuries of subordination, marked by the defeat of the Vijayanagara in 1564 (p.17). Growing from a few feudal villages in the mid-sixteenth century, the Wadiyars consolidated Mysore into a robust and influential kingdom in the following centuries. By the end of the seventeenth century, under Chikkadevaraja Wadiyar, the expansionist state came to be recognised as the 'Imperial authority of the South' (p.42).

Power struggles between the Mughals, Marathas, and the Nawab of Hyderabad, along with the rivalries with the Nawab of Arcot and the Rajas of the Malabar coast, ushered in disorder in the eighteenth-century Deccan, which saw a tumultuous time in the neighbourhood of Mysore. The French and English foreign powers did not hesitate to exploit the unrest to their advantage (Sampath, 2008, p.139-140).

Internal power struggles and weak successive rulers of Mysore Wadiyars after Chikkadevaraja made way for the rule of the *Dalavayis*, or military commanders.

The *Dalavayis* successfully wielded their political influence in the palace and on the king and administration (Gopal & Prasad, 2010, p.19). Haidar Ali, a loyal Muslim soldier from within the Mysore army, made his way up the ranks, dethroned the *Dalavayis*, and became the *Sarvadhikari*, or the sovereign authority of Mysore (Sampath, 2008, p.14).

Haidar seized every opportunity and filled the power vacuum to become the de facto ruler or the Sultan of Mysore. He stopped short of assuming the title of the king and continued to act on behalf of the maharaja, who was retained as the nominal or titular head of state (Sampath, 2008, p.167). Drastically changing the political landscape of the Deccan, Haidar built a strong expansionist military force and extended his friendship with the French, as a result of which he faced the wrath and enmity of the East India Company (Gopal & Prasad, 2010, p.14). The complex treaties of the Deccan powers with the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Marathas led to the first Anglo-Mysore war.

Haidar died from ill health during the Second Anglo-Mysore War, and his fierce son, Tipu Sultan, succeeded him. Unlike his father, Tipu had no regard for the Wadiyars and saw them as a lingering lineage with no consequence to the polity. Thus, he renamed Mysore '*Sultan-e-Khudad*' or the 'Kingdom of Allah'. Tipu and his French-trained army lost to the British forces, and he died in the fourth Anglo-Mysore War. In 1799, with the fall of Tipu, power over a partitioned Mysore was restored to barely five-year-old Krishnaraja Wadiyar III of the erstwhile dynasty at the behest of the British (Sampath, 2008, p.382). The king signed a subsidiary alliance to maintain British forces stationed within his borders and a British Resident in the Capital city following the 1799 Treaty of Srirangapatna, paving the way for his indirect rule.

After nearly four decades, Mysore entered a lasting period of relative peace and stable borders. Citing the poor administration of the Raja after he attained majority, the English East India Company subsequently imposed colonial rule by bringing in another half-century of Commissioners' rule from 1831 (Gopal & Prasad, 2010, p.62).

*'After 1831, as most narratives have it, the Maharaja turned his quest for legitimacy to the private realm and clung to every small vestige of authority within his kingdom. The privileged cultural realm under the patronage of the Maharaja was neither representational (in terms of the rulers being seen as the center of de facto kingship) nor aesthetic (for which the conditions*

*of possibility emerged only in the late nineteenth century in Mysore).'*' (Nair, 2011, p.9)

Janaki Nair (2011) regards the period of Commissioner's rule as a renewed representational regime suspended between the emergence of 'exhibition value' and 'cult value', in which the artistic productions of the early nineteenth century clung on to vestiges of legitimacy by portraying an unbroken lineage (p.10). I argue that patronage of art in the palace atelier and its architecture, and the theatrics of royal ceremonies were necessary for the Wadiyar kings to counter modern colonial hegemony in the administrative realm by affirming their nominal power through the aesthetic realm.

### **Aesthetics of Power: Reclamation of the Wadiyar Legacy**

Krishnaraja Wadiyar III has left behind a vast cache of visual and cultural heritage that defines early modern Mysore. His patronage of paintings, music, literature and architecture, a significant aspect of his legacy, compensated for his lack of political power as a titular monarch (Gopal & Prasad, 2010).

The young Krishnaraja Wadiyar's coronation in Figure 2, an early example of a Mysore-style manuscript possibly commissioned before the first half of the nineteenth century, is a modest attempt to commemorate the return of the Wadiyar dynasty to the golden throne of Mysore. One can deduce the style of this painting as an amalgamation of the palace painting styles of South India at the time owing to its proximity to the historical paintings at the Dariya Daulat palace paintings of Tipu in Srirangapatna (Nair, 2011, p.32). Power dynamics are evident in this composition, where the Maharaja and the British officer are the only seated figures while others pay tribute to the enthroned Wadiyar.

To retain their power after the coronation, the East India Company installed Purniah, who served under Tipu as the *Dewan* or the Prime Minister, to manage the administration of Mysore under the minor king. The British army chief, Col. Marquess Wellesley, used Purniah's position as the *Dewan* to suggest and guide the young king's court (Gopal & Prasad, 2010, p.24). This power dynamic is evident in the painting as one of the pillars holding up the coronation pavilion on the right is visually removed from the foreground to emphasise the British officer in his red coat. Notably, this manuscript painting depicts Purniah behind the right column, signalling the Wadiyar's discontent with his mediation of their claim to power. Following the coronation, the British made Bangalore the administrative capital, leaving the city of Mysore to the royal family. This geographical

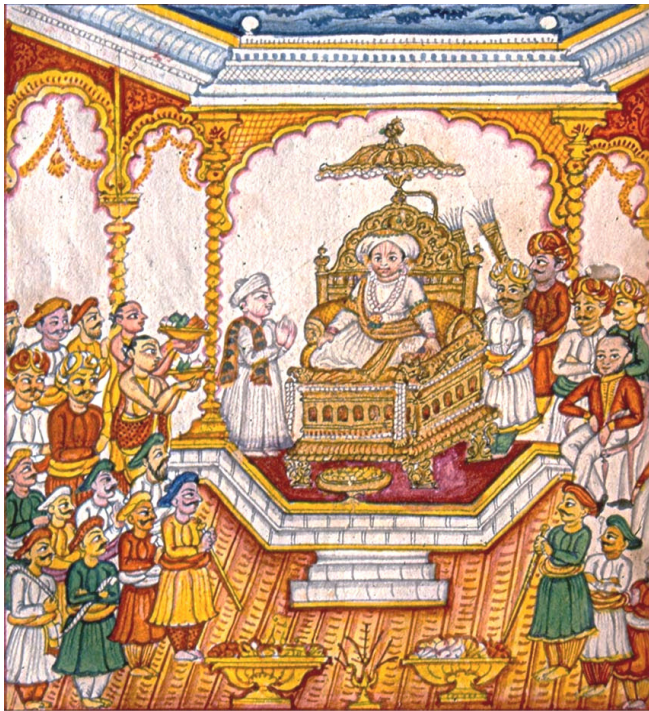


Figure 2. Coronation of Mumtaz Ali Krishna Raja Wodeyar. Dewan Purniah is seen standing on the right of the throne and Lt. Col. Wellesly on the left. Mysore style illustration on paper (30 June 1799)

shift in administration resulted in the emergence of renewed Mysorean aesthetics that echoed their emblematic power. Janaki Nair remarks that regal patronage and visualisation of dynastic legitimacy ensued from the symbolic liberation of the city as the site for princely pomp.

*‘The cultivation of a court of practitioners of music, literature, and art, for which nineteenth-century Mysore has been so critically acclaimed, was clearly in inverse proportion to the political powers that the king enjoyed and was also in direct contrast to the paltry production of the previous forty years.’ (Nair, 2011, p.61)*

Successive Wodeyar kings continuously evolved their dynastic traditions, employing artistic devices to reclaim their legitimacy to the throne of Mysore within their limited autonomy. This evolution, which was often expressed through their freedom of expression in the field of cultural production, is a testament to their adaptability and resilience.

**Painting: an unbroken lineage**

The Wodeyar kings employed symbolic or aesthetic religio-political displays of power to restore their claim of legitimacy to the throne of Mysore. Some of the extant vibrant Mysore-style murals created at the Jagannathan palace, close to the main palace, under the

patronage of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III display this. Visitors to the *Ranga Mahal* (Hall of Colours) at this palace can still see the centrepiece on the west wall, where a coalesced narrative conjures the picture of an unbroken legacy. Painted in the 1860s, the genealogical tree of the Wodeyar dynasty in Figure 3 represents the Wodeyar monarchs and their brothers, depicting a period of continuous power traced back to Yaduraya expressing the ‘mid-century anxieties’ of the separation of symbolic and actual power (Nair, 2011, p.84).

Krishnaraja III, highlighted on the golden Mysore throne, can be seen painted inside a golden frame. At the same time, his predecessors make up the rest of the ancestral canopy that originates from a crescent Moon, symbolising the lunar clan of the Yadava dynasty. Flanked by the Sun and Moon, blessed by heavenly deities of the Hindu pantheon on the two upper sides of the frame, the monarch’s claim is revered by his courtly attendants depicted in the lowest register on each side. The narrative skillfully overwrites periods of the Wodeyar’s fragmented rule and the disrupted lineage, omitting the reign of the *Dalavayis*, Haider, Tipu and downplaying the extent of British administrative power. The extensive patronage of art by Krishnaraja III enabled him to wield his power in the aesthetic realm even under indirect rule, altering political history through pictorial retellings for everyone who laid eyes on such murals and paintings.

**Theatre State: Mysore’s evolving aesthetics of power**

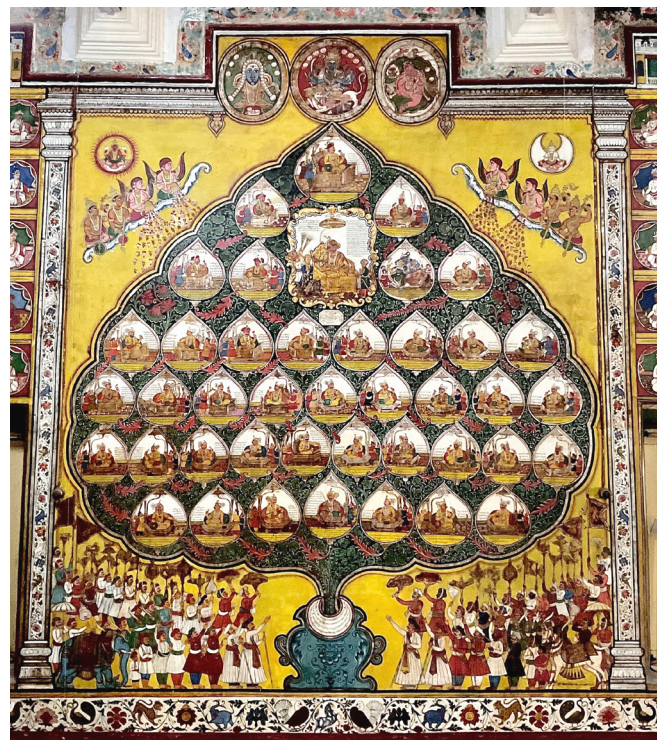


Figure 3. After P.L. Rice, *Mysore Gazetteer*, Vol-1, 1897

Janaki Nair examines the meaning of princely power and its operation during colonial rule in India; she suggests that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were sites of the 'theatre state' for the native kings, limited to symbolic displays representing their value and practising their power (Nair, 2011, p.3).

The palaces of Mysore, the residences of the Wadiyar monarchy, became sites for the emergence of artistic productions and the continuous evolution of dynastic traditions, countering the colonial narrative of power with grand, theatrical spectacles. Among the few annual occasions when the Raja could hold public ceremonies, the Dasara festival proved to be the most effective and symbolic display to exercise his powers that combined the political and religious spheres. With its grandeur and significance, this festival underscored the power and influence of the Wadiyar kings.

### The Mysore Dasara

*Dasara* (dasarā in Kannada) is a festival celebrated on the first ten lunar days of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, corresponding to the period from September to October in the solar calendar (Ikegame, 2013, p.143). This Hindu festival celebrated across India as *Navaratri*, is especially ingrained in the culture of the royal family. Raja Wadiyar I, the ninth ruler of Mysore, sought to continue the grand 10-day festivities as a state ritual, continuing the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara tradition (Sampath, 2008, p.686). The Mysore Dasara, with its deep historical roots, marks the triumph of good over evil with holy rituals fused with royal patronage, pageantry and participation.

Leslie Brubaker and Chris Wickham study the role of power in processions between the spectators and participants of imperial and religious urban processions



Figure 4. Mural of Krishnaraja Wadiyar III during the Dasara procession at Jaganmohan palace (Source: Author)

(p.127). The authors explore these Western examples of the polarisation of power between the church and the state in *Processions, Power, and Community Identity*. Unlike these Mediterranean examples, the Mysore Dasara festival, as in many other kingdoms in India, amalgamated regal authority with religious authority, accentuating its significance. Nevertheless, it is helpful to understand the symbolic and performative nature of the Dasara celebrations as enacted at Mysore through the framework offered by Brubaker and Wickham: 'As such processions (unfold), they become flashpoints for imperial or religious authority, highly public events that remind everybody involved of the social and hierarchical makeup of society'.

Rather than describing the rituals and ceremonies of dynastic traditions that several authors have attempted, I will explore the aesthetic value of overlapping sites of the Mysore Dasara that revolved around the palace. To retain the aesthetic value of the grand processions beyond the annual celebrations, Krishnaraja III commissioned murals that could sustain the imagined power through art on the palace walls:

*'The steady transformation of the Jaganmohan palace, which in the nineteenth century had been a spacious bungalow belonging to the palace for the entertainment of European visitors, into a public art gallery is a revealing instance of negotiations made by the palace authorities to create an exhibitionary space that would awe, educate, and entertain the public.'* (Nair, 2011, p.159)

The mural of the Dasara procession in Figure 4 at the Jaganmohan palace depicts the monarch and his perceived power. The golden-robed Krishnaraja III, shown in a larger-than-life manner at the centre of a procession stretching across the *Ranga Mahal's* three walls, is a striking example. The importance of the self-representing monarchy is highlighted by skewing the proportions of the chariot with the six miniaturised bull elephants that are needed to pull it. The Mysore painters highlight dynastic power and the majesty of the Wadiyar raja by equating his authority to the force driving the royal carriage, making it appear visually heavier than it was in reality.

The Mysore Dasara revolved around the palace, where rituals, processions and symbolic displays of power would begin and end. This tradition of place-making, concentrated around the palace, cemented the Dasara pageantry to the physical space of Mysore city, away from the British administrative capital of Bangalore. The palace in Mysore still hosts the Dasara

celebrations despite the royal family's diminished roles in a democratic state. The performative nature of the Wadiyar's role in the Mysore Dasara's public imagination supplemented their claim to power. The king would enact this through lavish private rituals within the palace and grand royal processions outside, embodying the festival's spirit as a token of his divine right.

The Dasara durbar painting in Figure 5 depicts Krishnaraja III with a greying moustache in contrast to his young portrait in Figure 2. The excessive use of gold and his central position in the painting portray his command of power and riches. The evolution of the Mysore style is apparent while comparing the Dasara durbar scene (Figure 5) with the coronation painting (Figure 2). From an art historical perspective, the absence of the Dewan or the British in this painting, even though the king is not seated on the golden throne, suggests that this specially erected Dasara pavilion in the old palace was a site for aestheticising his symbolic proclamation to power.

Elaborate Hindu rituals and symbolic traditions mark the beginning of the preparations for the annual festival that prescribes the worship of the royal horse and the elephant seen in the lower register (Gopal & Swamy, 2010, p.65). The bright reds, blues, and greens of this Durbar scene complement the use of gold and jewellery in the painting, projecting the grandiosity and opulence of the patron. The formal body language of the courtly women and the royal attendants, with their folded hands and patient gazes fixed on the viewer, hint at the authority wielded by the king, whose graceful participation would be paramount to set the festival in motion.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Mysore painting had developed its distinctive style at the court of Krishnaraja Wadiyar III. Gold is another prominent feature of Mysore paintings, similar to those of the Tanjore school brought in by migrating artists. The 'Mysore style' developed a distinctive character by incorporating Tanjore and European styles (Goswamy et al, 2019, p.213).

Mysore paintings distinguish themselves from northern influences or other styles such as the Deccani, Vijayanagara or regional courts of the south. Janaki Nair attributes this to the relative paucity of examples from previous epochs owing to experimentation by Mysore artists (p.64). Colonial influences on Mysore paintings are evident in the depiction of British officers and their characteristic costumes, among other European elements such as chandeliers, frames, and fixtures that

were not indigenous.

### The European Durbar: Negotiating the regal aesthetic

The four paintings of the Mysore court artists discussed so far reveal the nuances of Wadiyar's claim to legitimacy and power under colonial administration. The self-representation in these murals and paintings subdue or deny the British presence in their visual instrumentality, which is far from the truth. To counter this narrative, tracing the evolution of the Dasara Durbar spectacle and aesthetics will help paint a different picture of power imbalances and negotiations.

*'During the colonial period, an important public ceremony was added to the Mysore Dasara, which was called 'the European Durbar'. While the usual durbar was held twice a day continuously for nine days, European guests, including the British Resident, and other officers in the residency, were invited to attend the first durbar on the evening of the ninth day. They observed the public worship of the royal arms, royal emblems, and the state horse and elephant. It is said that the European durbar was started during the reign of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III in the early nineteenth century.'* (Ikegame, 2013, p.149)

What began as a mere curiosity to witness exotic oriental rituals and fascinating public displays would eventually become an opportunity for the British to exert control over the Mysore Durbar. Aya Ikegame provides insights into how the European Durbar would become a flash point for the princely state and the colonial power to negotiate their involvement, which the palace would finally accept by modifying the ceremonial proceedings. The Maharaja's being at the helm of Dasara Durbars made the colonial authority uncomfortable to such an extent that the British Resident formalised and 'codified every minute of the acts and procedures of these ceremonies' (Ikegame, 2013, p.153).

Despite this initial resistance to changing age-old practices, the Maharaja would have had to re-appropriate Dasara Durbar to make alterations to accommodate the colonial power. Figure 6 is a departure from the paintings of Dasara by Mysore artists and depicts the Maharaja's court from a realistic European perspective, indicating how political power was balanced and negotiated. Although realistic, this reproduction of the Durbar by the colonial engraver F. C. Lewis has traces of his faint memory of the city matched with his imagination of the palace, albeit geographically inaccurate. Chamundi Hill is the only hill on the city's visual horizon which would not be



Figure 5. Krishnaraja Wodeyar III in Zenana Darbar

visible from this angle. He further flexes his imaginative skills in this print by visualising and highlighting the hierarchy of the natives (depicted seated on the floor) and Europeans (depicted as either seated on chairs or standing). These subtle nuances of visuality represent the throne's subordination to the colonials while holding on to nominal power.

### Staging Legitimacy: Mysore's Aesthetic Politics from Raj to Republic

The second half of the nineteenth century was a tumultuous time for the British. Following the political instability and uprising of the Sepoy Mutiny, the colonial power transitioned from the British East India Company to Imperial rule under the British crown. The period following the 1858 proclamation by the British Queen is known as the period of the Raj (Sampath, 2008, p.500). In Mysore, a decade later, the illustrious Krishnaraja Wadiyar III would breathe his last, making way for his adopted son.

Although Krishnaraja would never rule Mysore as an absolute monarch, he persevered to redeem his name and the throne for his family (Sampath, 2008, p.486). He negotiated Mysore's sovereignty and reinstated the Wadiyar legacy by taking the matter to the British Parliament, which Queen Victoria subsequently ratified (p. 483). As a connoisseur and patron of art, music, and literature, the contributions of Krishnaraja III, more commonly known as Mummadi Krishnaraja, or simply Mummadi, in the nineteenth century, had a lasting impact with the development of the 'Mysore style'.

*'His means had become severely limited during this period of his virtual exile from the sources of worldly power, but his creative powers remained undiminished*

*and his resolve to stay close to his cultural roots was unaffected' (Goswamy et al., 2019, p.27).*

Although the young Chamarajendra Wadiyar X ascended the throne in 1868 following Krishnaraja's demise, power would only be restored to the dynasty when he attained majority. The 'Rendition' of 1881 was a victory for the Mysore Kingdom. This event marked the transition of power from the Commissioner's rule to the eighteen-year-old Wadiyar (Sampath, 2008, p.496). During his short rule, serving both as titular (1868-1881) and an absolute monarch (1881-1894) in a subsidiary alliance with the British, the twenty-third maharaja would make some significant and revered contributions to the Mysore's emblematic representations in terms of art production that solidified the power of the state at the national level. He is also known for composing the 'national anthem' of Mysore, which still resonates in palatial and Dasara ceremonies today (Nair, 2011, p.12).

The Mysore-style painting in Figure 7 marks the beginning of a hopeful and more stable regime by depicting Chamarajendra X's coronation. Troops of the royal and colonial armies are seen surrounding palace's the central pavilion, standing shoulder to shoulder, indicating confidence in the reinstated power to rule over the princely state that had eluded Mummadi. Comparing Chamarajendra's coronation painting (Figure 7) to Mummadi's coronation just after Tipu's defeat (Figure 2), we can see the pomp and grandeur of the spectacle, accentuated by a stable period of the royal house set in the context of the old palace. Upon careful observation, we can see that the golden throne in Figure 2 faces away from the British officers. However, it is oriented towards the British Resident and state officers in Figure 7, symbolising a more cordial power relationship.

### Aesthetics of Modern Mysore: Twentieth century onwards

In a space limited by colonialism, the twentieth-century Mysore kings carved out unique identities and established closer relationships with the people and city of Mysore. The grand Dasara celebrations, under absolute monarchy, continued to evolve, with modernity contributing to their documentation and portrayal through photography.

Modernity found its way even into the royal palace's architecture, which, after the fire of 1897, was recommissioned as a symbol of reinstated confidence using modern construction techniques. The new palace, called Amba Vilas, gave Mysore a heightened sense of visibility and self-representation with modern features

like the 143 ft. central gilded cupola of six stories and the use of iron pillars that hold up the stained-glass ceiling of the Durbar or royal audience hall (Nair, 2011, p.151). Multiple authors observed how the British Architect Henry Irwin infused the gothic style of architecture with elements of Hindu and Islamic heritage in the design of the new palace. They also point to the adaptation of European influences in the Indo-Saracenic style of city aesthetics. This invention of a new regal aesthetic forged new bonds with the subjects, with ever more people attending the Dasara celebrations at the palace and its grand processions.

Imperial rituals of the *Dasara* celebrations seen in the paintings of the new Mysore palace in the twentieth century varied from their counterparts at the Jaganmohan palace. Mysore artists began to use photographs to adopt realism, diverging from the traditional 'Mysore style'. The Maharaja, accompanied by his brother and his successor on the *Dasara* procession, symbolises the visibility of self-representation in the interest of claiming legitimacy. Seated inside a golden canopy (*howdah*), mounted on a decorated elephant and surrounded by a sea of people that include their entourage and the public, the last two Wadiyars to rule as absolute monarchs (Krishnaraja IV and Jayachamaraja) continued their production of spectacle as an instrument of state power. Unlike the genealogy mural at Jaganmohan palace (Figure 3), the realistic paintings at the new palace, still adorned by Ravi Varma's royal portraits, capture the immediate lineage through their portrayals, reinforcing the narrative of an unbroken legacy.

*'With reference to photographic image induced descriptive fidelity in the visualization of the situation; depicted people had prominent, unrepeatable and unique physiognomic features. [The depiction of the people's spontaneous activity retained naturalism in their behaviour, which was in contrast with the previous tradition of Mysore painting style, where the movements and the postures were considerably limited and repeated as per convention]' (S K, 2022, p.12).*

Modern instrumentalities such as photography and construction techniques played a significant role in liberating traditional palace painting and architectural style aesthetics. The Wadiyar dynasty's confidence in self-representation embraced European idioms and legitimised their autonomy as the power of the Mysore throne crystallised in the first half of the twentieth century. During this period, the British Empire in India weakened due to the World Wars and the Indian Independence movement, further challenging



Figure 6. *The Dussarah Durbar of His Highness Maharaja of Mysore (Lewis, F.C. 1848-1849)*

the Wadiyars' claim to their seat of power. This incorporation of modern instrumentalities sheds light on the dynamic nature of Mysore's aesthetics.

#### Adoption and Adaptation: The Royal House of Mysuru

The continuity of the Mysore emblem and the palace edifice in the visibility of contemporary India's political spheres in the second half of the twentieth century is apparent as the monarchical power of the Wadiyars changed to that of a democratic Indian state.

Jayachamaraja Wadiyar, the twenty-fifth king of Mysore, signed the Instrument of Accession in 1947 and joined the Indian dominion after the British Partition of India, making him the last Maharaja after Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV (Poonacha, 2020). The 'State of Mysore' was formed by redrawing its borders to form based on the linguistic demography of the Kannada-speaking population in 1956 (Ikegame, 2013, p.263). Ikegame notes that renaming Mysore to Karnataka in 1973 obliterated one small link with its long past (p.267). After India gained independence, the seat of power in Karnataka shifted to the state capital of Bangalore. Furthermore, on the State Formation Day anniversary of 2014, Mysore was renamed Mysuru, shedding its colonial name (PTI, 2014). Mysore's emblematic identity was a consolation to the Wadiyar's rule, as it became embedded into Karnataka's self-representation as an homage to its legacy. The palace Dasara, too, continues without the monarchy as the 'theatre state' embraces new political regimes.

The appropriation of the Mysore Coat of Arms as the State Emblem underscores the credibility that the democratic State of Karnataka gained from the Wadiyar's benevolent rule. This transformation of the royal Mysore insignia into the Karnataka State Emblem reveals an

aesthetic of power in flux, inviting the audience to delve deeper into its symbolic and political significance.

The current titular monarch, Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar, attributes the armorial bearing design of Mysore to Robert Taylor, an employee of the Bengal Civil Service and describes the iconography of the Royal Coat of Arms as follows:

*'The [Gandaberunda] bird symbolises strength and is often shown to be aggressive. The two heads facing opposite directions are supposed to stand for Justice and Vigilance: when one head sleeps the other keeps awake, thereby fulfilling their duty of eternal protection. It is held on either side by the elephant-headed lion Sharabha which again stands for unprecedented strength and valor'* (Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar, n.d.).

The Government of Karnataka continued using the

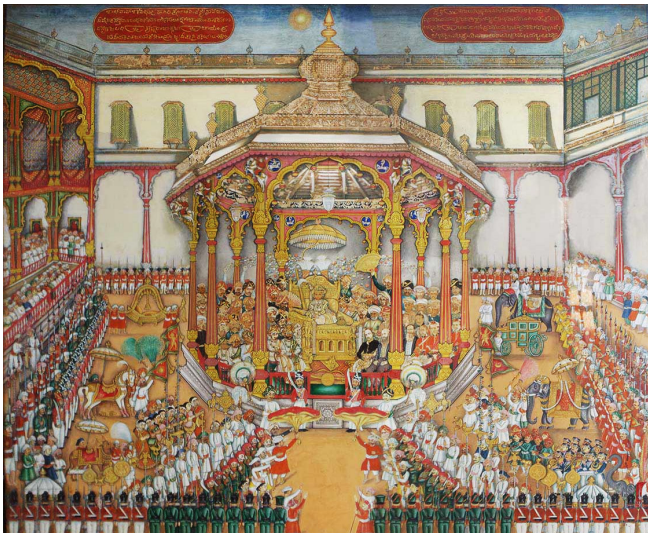


Figure 7. Magnificent Mysuru style miniature depicting the coronation of Chamarajendra Wadiyar X in the old wooden palace of Mysuru. (Artist: Venkatasubbu. 23 September 1868)



Figure 8. 'Maharaja Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV, Yuvaraja Kantheerava Narasimharaja Wadiyar and Sri Jayachamaraja Wadiyar in the Dasara Procession 'Jambu Savari'.

Mysore heraldic symbol, which Jayachamaraja Wadiyar used when appointed the first Governor of Mysore State (Figure 9b). The dynastic crest of the lion holding Mahishasura's severed head was notably replaced by the Indian state emblem, derived from the Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath (Figure 9a). An interpretation of this adaptation of the Mysore insignia and the adoption of the Lion Capital suggests an attempt to nationalise regional power. Other changes observed from Figures 9a to 9b, apparent in the shape of the shield, the colours, and the motto, indicate the new allegiance of the state to a democratic Indian nation. This adaptation of the regal aesthetic marked the symbolic and political restructuring of post-colonial Mysore. A deeper, semiotic reading of varying details, such as the angular positioning of the elephant-headed lions supporting the shield and the downward tilt of the two-headed bird, signals a more sober representation and a firmer grip on centralised power.

The Karnataka Government retained the heraldic emblem of the Wadiyar's legacy after the death of Jayachamaraja Wadiyar, leaving his successor, titular royal Srikantadatta Wadiyar, without the power of dynastic identity. *Gandaberunda*, the two-headed bird association with the Royal House of Mysore needed to be reinvented to reclaim the familiar regal aesthetic that had long been an accessory of the Wadiyars. The logotype design of the current scion Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar tactfully reclaims this lost legacy. Paying attention to the logotype in Figure 9c, we can see the initials YKCW resemble the *Gandaberunda* bird through calligraphic means. This evolution of the royal emblem in contemporary times is a clear testament to the desire of Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar to be seen as a Wadiyar scion.

### The Edifice: A site for theatre states, old and new

The Amba Vilas palace attracts thousands of visitors annually, especially during the Dasara festivities. The Wadiyar's twentieth-century reinvention of a modern aesthetic of the ceremonial pageantry around the Indo-Saracenic palace remains an ongoing site for the theatre state. Ingrained in the popular imagination and heightened by the adoration of the Wadiyar dynasty, Mysore's palaces remain the most important landmarks of a bygone princely era. The twentieth-century emergence of the palace's visual aesthetic enabled Mysore's continuously evolving cultural identity. 1969 marked the transition of the Mysore from the Wadiyar hands to the state government as the twenty-fifth Maharaja celebrated the last royal Dasara after the abolition of royal titles and the Privy Purse, an



Figure 9a. ‘Coat of Arms of Mysore’ in *The Golden Book of India: a genealogical and biographical dictionary of the ruling princes, chiefs, nobles, and other personages, titled or decorated, of the Indian empire*

Figure 9b. Government of Karnataka. The Emblem of Karnataka

Figure 9c. Logotype of Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar, the Current Scion of the Royal House of Mysore

allowance paid to the former princely states (Kumar, 2019). The devastated Wadiyars even abstained from public participation in a tradition they had continued for centuries. Thus began a deep rift between the state and the royals in their claim to the palace as a site for power projection and self-representation. Today, a majority of the Amba Vilas Palace is open to the public and run by the state government.

Vikram Sampath notes that the Dasara festivities around the palace continue under the democratic government with as much pomp and gaiety today. In contrast, the erstwhile royal family’s rituals and celebrations are limited and conducted in the private parts of the palace (Sampath, 2008, p.688). The Maharaja, who would once mount the processional elephant’s golden canopy, has been replaced by the deity of *Chamundeshwari* since the abolition of royal titles. Even though royal precedents continue, the festivities have been reinvented for public audiences as the Karnataka Government now celebrates Dasara as the ‘People’s Festival’.

The photograph of the Prime Minister of India (Figure 10) subtly illustrates the rift between the royals and the government’s claim to the aesthetic of princely power. Uploaded on the state’s Tourism website, with no mention of the Wadiyars, it marks the appropriation of Mysore’s cultural identity for the state’s self-representation. Besides being the site for the state’s annual Dasara celebrations, the Amba Vilas palace has now been reduced to a source of revenue and political mileage derived from royal prestige.

*‘In private, ordinary Indians still discuss and remember*

*the[ royals], a great many ceremonial and ritual occasions still require their presence, and, in many parts of India, a link to royalty, no matter how ephemeral, is still often used and valued. Politicians and leaders in various walks of life seek to imitate them and employ kingly symbols, discourses, and instruments of patronage.’ (Ikegame, 2013, p.1)*

Today, the Amba Vilas palace serves as a site for theatrical displays of power where successive Chief Ministers of Karnataka inaugurate the annual Dasara celebrations as the State Festival. It is also a site whose historical and contemporary imaginations are often transplanted as a symbol of reverence and credibility to the royal family. The images of a political rally in Figure 11 show the construction of a faux facade of the Amba Vilas palace just a few kilometres from the actual palace. The flatness of this mimicking transfixion illustrates the polarity between the state and the royal palace, evident in the imposition of portraits of contemporary politicians on the palace cutouts. The scaffolds of the temporary

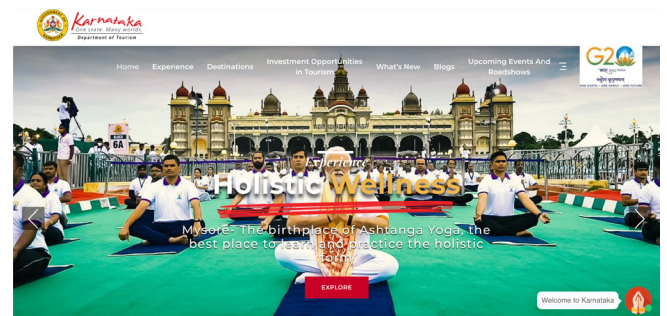


Figure 10. The Indian Prime Minister in front of the Amba Vilas palace on International Yoga Day, 2022

faux facade fade in contrast to the permanence of the royal legacy left behind by the vestigial productions of the political and the aesthetic.

### Conclusion

Tracing the evolution and aesthetics of power from a regal Mysore under colonialism to a political Mysuru post-independence, I have employed several case studies to extend the theme of the 'theatre state' dealt with in the works of Aya Ikegame and Janaki Nair. I have used examples of artistic productions by the Wadiyars, the British, and today's bureaucrats to argue that the emergence of the regal aesthetic in Mysore was a constant and continuous response to the flux in the political sphere.

Through the manuscript and the palace paintings, I have investigated the nuances of power negotiations during the colonial period by situating them in the evolution of the 'Mysore style' under Wadiyar's patronage. Colonial artworks and commissions examined the

subjugation of power in Mysore through the semiotic readings of representation and symbolism. The palatial Dasara processions through the centuries illustrated the changing power dynamics and shifting sites of regal and political aesthetics. Contemporary appropriations of Mysore's emblem display the responsive and aesthetic reinventions of older symbolisms that have bolstered the legitimacy of the Wadiyar's Mysuru. And finally, the reframing of the Amba Vilas palace edifice illustrates the political mileage that is derived from repurposing the legacy of the Wadiyar dynasty. These art historical and contemporary contextualisations of Mysuru's visual and popular cultural productions are a testament to the interplay between its optics and aesthetics of power.

Note: This article is a revised version of the author's final thesis submitted



Figure 11. Faux facade cutouts of the Amba Vilas Palace installed for a political rally in Mysore, 2023 (Source: Author)

as part of the Postgraduate Diploma in Indian Aesthetics at Jnanapravaha, Mumbai (2023-24). The author has provided all images for this article, and has obtained the necessary permissions for the use of all images included in this publication. Bindu Maringanti, Research Assistant, WCFA (2025-26) helped in editing this article.

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Figure 7. '23 September 1868. Magnificent Mysuru style miniature depicting the coronation of Chamarajendra Wadiyar X in the old wooden palace of Mysuru. Also seen are the royal animals, carriages and palanquin. On the left side of the throne is seated the British Resident and State Officers, on the right side is Aliya Lingaraja Urs who played a significant role during the Regency of Vanivilasa Sannidhana. Artist: Venkatasubbu. Image courtesy: Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysuru.. Singh, R G. Of Places and Mysore. 25 June 2016. rgsingh.blogspot.com/2016/06/the-coronation-of-wodeyar-kings.html. Accessed 20 May 2024.

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