Colonialism, Gender, and Women's Lives in Princely Mysore: Intersections of Culture, Power, and Reform

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Abstract:

This paper explores the multifaceted effects of British colonialism on gender roles and women's lives in the princely state of Mysore. Moving beyond the economic and administrative dimensions of colonial rule, it examines how the cultural ideologies of the British Empire redefined femininity, masculinity, and indigenous kinship practices. Particular attention is given to traditional matrilineal customs, evolving marriage practices, women's education, legislative interventions, and the rise of modernity in Mysore. The study argues that the colonial enterprise was not merely a political venture but also a psychological and cultural project that profoundly reshaped social structures, especially in relation to women's status and rights.

Keywords: Colonialism, Gender, Women's Lives, Princely Mysore, Social.

Introduction

British colonialism in India extended well beyond the realms of economic exploitation and political domination; it was also an expansive cultural and psychological project aimed at reshaping the identities of the colonized. Central to this endeavour was the transformation of gender relations. British colonizers constructed a narrative of their own masculinity as strong, rational, and disciplined, while casting Indian men as emotional, passive, and effeminate. To justify their rule, the British positioned themselves as protectors of Indian women and guardians of civilization. They infantilized Indians, portraying them as childlike, immature, and incapable of self-governance. This paternalistic narrative presented the colonizers as the "responsible" adults guiding their "childlike" colonial subjects. Even educated Indians were regarded as perpetual students rather than equals. Over time, many colonial subjects internalized these foreign ideas, leading to a crisis of self-identity. Indian elites, in particular, adopted British cultural norms, often

reinforcing the very hierarchies that had been imposed upon them. These representations not only legitimized British claims of superiority but also advanced the so-called civilizing mission, especially through the narrative of rescuing "oppressed" Indian women from their own traditions.

Modernity and Gender Reform in Colonial Discourse

British rule in India introduced new ideas about women's roles and capabilities, reshaping traditional hierarchies. These emerging secular hierarchies often clashed with the existing social order, yet they also opened new opportunities, particularly for those marginalized within the traditional system. For many contemporaries, such changes appeared to be the first step toward a more equal world. Under colonial rule, India was portrayed as moving toward modernity after a long period of stagnation and decline. Salvation, it was argued, came in the form of Western governance, technology, and values. Modern institutions and structures were established, accompanied by what the British claimed was a critical, analytical, and scientific spirit brought to a so-called "barbaric" world.

One of the central questions in nineteenth-century colonial India was how women could be "modernized." This issue held particular significance because the British cast themselves as a civilizing force, interpreting their rule over India as

evidence of their moral and cultural superiority. Women's status became a key metric by which a society's progress was judged. Christian missionaries often cited the allegedly low status of Indian women as justification for intervention and reform.

The British introduced new forms of social relationships and framed their actions within a worldview they considered clear, precise, instrumental, scientific, and beneficial to all who encountered it. Ideals such as humanitarianism, equality, rationalism, utilitarianism, social Darwinism, and nationalism gained influence in India. Within this framework, India was positioned lower on the evolutionary scale than Western Europe, and any hope for progress was thought to lie in the adoption of Western ideas and institutions.

For Indian men—who had already lost political power, suffered economic decline, and faced military subjugation—cultural assertion became a critical means of reclaiming agency. The redefinition of gender roles was perceived as an essential step toward societal progress. This gave rise to a new, gentler ideology that promoted reform in the treatment of women as part of a broader national rejuvenation. What emerged was an "Indian modernity" that blended elements of tradition with imported ideas.

Indian reformers adapted these foreign concepts to fit local social and cultural contexts. The resulting ideology was an amalgamation of Western notions and

indigenous values. However, not all agreed that gender relations required significant modification. Some Indian intellectuals praised their culture's existing treatment of women, while others accepted the argument that societal advancement depended on women's education—viewing it as the first step toward broader reform and national progress.

Princely Mysore

The princely state of Mysore came under British influence following the defeat and death of Tipu Sultan in 1799. The British adopted a policy of indirect rule, whereby the Wodeyars nominally governed the state, but real sovereignty was constrained. From 1831 to 1881, British Commissioners administered Mysore directly. The restoration of 1881 marked a turning point, formalizing indirect rule and projecting a façade of Indian self-governance. Although the Wodeyars remained politically submissive to the British, Mysore acquired a reputation as a "model state" within colonial India.

Indirect rule facilitated selective economic modernization—railways, irrigation systems, taxation reforms, and bureaucratic expansion—but these developments remained firmly within limits that served colonial interests. A new Indian elite—comprising bureaucrats, landed gentry, and professionals— emerged from this system. Often collaborating with the British in exchange for privileges and social prestige, this elite

championed ideal of order, progress, and development. Yet, from a subaltern perspective, it is crucial to understand how women, workers, and lower-caste groups negotiated, resisted, and reinterpreted modernity on their own terms.

Despite Mysore's progressive achievements in public education, urban planning, and industrial growth under the Wodeyar dynasty, social reform lagged behind economic and infrastructural advancements. Women remained largely confined to domestic roles, with patriarchal norms governing their mobility, access to education, and participation in public life. Even state-led initiatives in women's education and healthcare were guided more by reformist objectives—aimed at producing disciplined, moral citizens—than by emancipatory visions of gender equality.

Modernity in Mysore was thus a deeply gendered process in which women were positioned as symbols of cultural continuity rather than as active agents of change. This contradiction—between a modernizing state and a conservative social order—highlights how colonial modernity and princely politics co-produced a restricted, patriarchal version of progress.

Gender, Family, and Inheritance in Princely Mysore

Despite its semi-autonomous status under British suzerainty, Mysore retained a range of indigenous social customs, including matrilineal and matrifocal

traditions among certain communities such as the Kurubas, Bedas, Vaddas, Dombars, Madigas, Holeyas, and Sillekyatas. In these groups, descent and inheritance often followed the female line, with the maternal uncle occupying a central role in kinship networks and decision-making.

Practices such as *Basavi* dedication—where unmarried daughters remained in their natal homes to continue the family lineage—and the *Illatom* son-in-law system—where a man married into his wife's household and assumed familial responsibilities there—illustrate these matrifocal tendencies. Cross-cousin marriage, particularly uncle–niece unions, further reinforced the persistence of matrilineal kinship systems. However, under the combined influence of colonial legal frameworks, Christian missionary activity, and elite-led social reforms, these traditions gradually yielded to dominant patrilineal norms.

Marriage Customs and Shifting Social Norms

Marriage practices in princely Mysore were diverse and deeply embedded within caste-based social frameworks. Among Brahmins, marriage was regarded as a sacred, indissoluble sacrament, with divorce strictly prohibited. In contrast, many non-Brahmin communities permitted divorce, widow remarriage, and levirate marriage, reflecting more flexible approaches to marital dissolution and family structure. Simplified remarriage

rituals, such as *Kudike* or *Sirudike*, highlight pragmatic attitudes toward gender relations and sexuality in these communities.

The introduction of Victorian ideals under British colonial influence reinforced patriarchal norms, particularly the emphasis on female modesty, chastity, and domesticity. Rather than challenging entrenched hierarchies, colonial administrators often aligned with upper-caste conservative sentiments, thereby legitimizing and strengthening existing gender inequalities.

Women's Education and Early Reform Initiatives

Education became a central arena for both colonial policy and indigenous reform in princely Mysore. Narasimha Iyengar emerged as a pioneering advocate for girls' education, founding the first school for upper-caste girls in 1881 with an initial enrolment of only 28 students. Despite considerable societal resistance—particularly the withdrawal of older girls due to prevailing norms—he persisted, later establishing additional schools in Melkote (1885) and Nanjangud (1888).

To further institutionalize women's education, a teachers' training school was founded in 1882. Yet, the expansion of educational opportunities for women was fraught with cultural tensions. Diwan Rangacharlu, for example, opposed the inclusion of music instruction for girls, reflecting broader anxieties about

propriety, morality, and the perceived dangers of women's public engagement.

Reformist and literary associations, including the Bangalore Literary Union, the Ranade Society, and the Widow Remarriage Association, brought questions of women's rights into public discussion. However, these debates remained largely confined to elite, urban circles, with limited reach into rural and lower-caste communities.

Institutionalization of Women's Education

The Mysore Representative Assembly formally endorsed girls' education in 1881, marking an important shift in official policy toward women's learning. Reformers such as Smt. Rukmaniyamma championed the cause of vernacular education for girls, directly challenging prevailing fears that female education would lead to moral corruption.

State patronage played a crucial role in expanding opportunities. Institutions such as the Maharani's Girls' School and the Women's College were established with financial support from the Devaraja Bahadur Fund. To encourage enrolment—particularly among students from underprivileged backgrounds—the state offered scholarships of up to ₹50 per month, a significant sum for the period.

By 1917, the founding of Maharani's Science College represented a landmark achievement in advancing women's higher education in Mysore, signaling both the consolidation of reformist

initiatives and the gradual acceptance of women's intellectual participation in public life.

Colonial Legislation and Civil Rights of Women

Colonial legal reforms in nineteenth-century India addressed emerging questions surrounding religious conversion, marriage, and women's civil rights. The 1813 Charter Act, which permitted Christian missionary activity in British territories, introduced both cultural and legal tensions into princely states such as Mysore. To address marital complications arising from religious conversion, the Converts' Marriage Dissolution Act (1866) was adopted in Mysore in 1881.

The Caste Disabilities Removal Act (1850), intended to protect the property rights of converts, saw little meaningful implementation in Mysore. The case of Huchchiya—later Helena Gartord—in 1872 illustrated the limits of colonial legal protections. After converting to Christianity, she resisted a forced marriage, yet her struggle revealed the entrenched resistance to women's autonomy within both Indian society and the colonial legal framework.

Child Marriage, Reform, and State Policy

Efforts to curb child marriage in Mysore emerged from the combined influence of Indian social reformers and British administrators. Prominent figures such as T.E. Slatter, Raja T. Madhava

Rao, and Shivanath Shastri publicly condemned the practice, contributing to national debates on women's rights. The 1891 Age of Consent Act, which raised the legal minimum age for marriage, was implemented in Mysore with considerable caution, reflecting the state's sensitivity to orthodox opinion.

Nevertheless, Mysore introduced several progressive measures. By 1894, it had prohibited the marriage of children under the age of eight, and in 1909, the administration formally abolished the *devadasi* (temple dedication) system through administrative action. In a landmark move, Mysore granted limited women's suffrage in legislative council elections in 1922, becoming one of the first princely states—and among the earliest jurisdictions globally—to extend voting rights to women.

Public Health, Family Planning, and Technocratic Reform

Mysore emerged as a pioneer in state-sponsored family planning and public health, embedding these initiatives within a broader vision of technocratic modernization. From the 1930s onward, the state established some of the earliest birth control clinics in princely India— arguably among the first in the world. These programmes reflected a dual impulse: on the one hand, a modernist ambition to promote public welfare through scientific planning; on the other, an entanglement with contemporary population-control ideologies and eugenic

thought, which often framed reproduction in terms of social engineering rather than reproductive autonomy.

Recovering Women's Agency in Everyday Life

Recent scholarship, notably by Prof. Mahadevi, has underscored the importance of archival materials—such as wills, property deeds, legal petitions, and remarriage records—in uncovering women's strategies for negotiating everyday life in colonial Mysore. While mainstream reformist and colonial narratives tended to portray women as passive recipients of change, a closer examination reveals active engagement with both tradition and reform.

Yet, these transformations were mediated by what scholars term "patriarchal modernity." Reforms disproportionately benefitted upper-caste, urban women, while systemic exclusions along caste and religious lines persisted. Beneath the surface of progressive legislation and institutional reform, practices such as *sati*, widow ostracism, and caste-based segregation continued to shape women's lived realities, complicating any simple narrative of linear progress.

Conclusion

Colonialism in Mysore, as in the rest of India, operated not only as an administrative apparatus but also as a cultural enterprise that redefined gender roles, social identities, and power structures. The encounter between

colonial ideologies and indigenous traditions produced a layered and often contradictory synthesis. While certain matrilineal and flexible customs endured, they were progressively eroded and replaced by patriarchal norms shaped by Victorian moral and social ideals.

Reform movements, educational initiatives, and legal interventions did expand women's public visibility and opportunities, yet they simultaneously reinforced entrenched caste boundaries and gender hierarchies. The legacy of colonial modernity in princely Mysore is therefore deeply ambivalent—marked by moments of resistance, accommodation, and selective adaptation. Examining these transformations offers valuable insight into the complex interplay of gender, power, and reform in colonial South Asia.

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