A Palace is More Than Government Property

newindianexpress.com/magazine/2026/Nov/08/a-palace-is-more-than-government-property

Dr Vikram Sampath

November 8, 2026



Responding recently to a disagreement with the Wadiyar royal family's Pramoda Devi over the conduct of the annual Mysore Dasara, Karnataka's Urban Development Minister and Mysuru district in-charge, Yathindra Siddaramaiah, stirred the hornet's nest. In a disparaging tone, he haughtily asserted that the palace was government property and that the royals had merely been allotted space to reside there "out of respect and honour". Expectedly, Yathindra's intemperate remarks offended several sections of society who erupted in spontaneous protests. This, however, opened up a much larger question: how does a government understand the history of the institution over which it exercises administrative control?

There is, of course, a legal dimension. The Mysore Palace (Acquisition and Transfer) Act, 1998, provides for the vesting of the palace in the state government. A democratic government is entitled to administer a public monument and ensure it remains accessible and protected. But the palace may be administered by the state, but the history it represents belongs to the people of Mysore and, indeed, to Karnataka. To speak of the royal family as though it were merely a group accommodated by the generosity of a

government or political party is to belittle the extraordinary relationship between this dynasty and the making of modern Karnataka.

The Wadiyars ruled Mysore for nearly six centuries, from 1399 until Independence. Their history was not an uninterrupted tale. There were periods of decline, usurpation of Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan, and the restoration of the dynasty under British paramountcy in 1799. Yet the later Wadiyars, starting with Chamarajendra Wadiyar X, helped transform Mysore into one of the most consequential princely states in British India. Assuming the reins of the state in 1881, he established the Mysore Representative Assembly under Dewan Rangacharlu, bringing landholders and merchants from different parts of the province into a forum where they could discuss matters of administration. The Karnataka Legislature itself recognises this as an important milestone in the evolution of representative institutions in India.

It was under his son and successor, Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, that the state acquired extraordinary momentum. Gandhi famously referred to him as a ‘Rajarishi’ and compared Mysore under his rule to ‘Ram Rajya’. This was not without reason. Mysore developed an impressive network of educational institutions, industries, public utilities, urban management, and representative bodies. The Legislative Council was established in 1907, widening the scope of public participation in governance. The state also became an early pioneer of affirmative action in public employment, following the recommendations of the Miller Committee in 1918.

The material achievements of this period are visible in contemporary Karnataka. Bangalore emerged as India’s first city to be electrified in the year 1905, thanks to the Shivanasamudra Hydroelectric project which was India’s first hydel plant. Bangaloreans are still beneficiaries of some of the irrigation schemes conceptualised during the Wadiyar time, like the Hessarghatta project and the Thippagondanahalli reservoir. The Krishnaraja Sagara (KRS) Dam on completion in 1931 created Asia’s biggest reservoir, second only to the Aswan Dam across the Nile in Egypt. It transformed irrigation and agriculture across the region. The University of Mysore, established in 1916, expanded higher education, while the growth of industries, banking and scientific institutions gave the state an economic foundation that would serve it long after the end of princely rule.

There is a particularly revealing story behind the KRS project. When British Chief Engineers drew the plan for this dam in 1908, the financial demands of the dam were enormous and beyond the state budget. It was then that the Regent Queen Kempananjammanni Vanivilasa Sannidhana and young Nalwadi Krishnaraja came up with an ingenious solution to overcome the deficit. Royal jewels and costly valuables with the family were dispatched to Bombay and sold at competitive prices there. The money so obtained was used to finance the project. How often in the history of princely India do we have such instances of selflessness in the royal family?

The story of the Indian Institute of Science is another reminder of this vision. Jamsetji Tata had conceived the idea of a major institution for scientific research in India. When the question of its location arose, the Mysore State readily offered 371 acres and 16 guntas of land in Bangalore, funds towards capital expenditure and an annual contribution of `50,000. The Regent Queen, Kempananjammanni Vani Vilasa Sannidhana, was instrumental in securing this commitment while her son was still a minor. IISc was formally established on May 27, 1909. The spin-offs were amazing, catapulting the city into a knowledge capital of India—an ideal destination for future space research, aeronautics, and information decades later, the IT industry. Is it merely a favour that a minister “allows” such a family to stay in the palace?

The dynasty’s contribution was not confined to administration and infrastructure. Mysore became one of India’s great centres of music, painting, literature and dance. The court patronised Carnatic musicians and also welcomed Hindustani and Western performers, allowing different musical traditions to meet and influence one another. The Mysore school of painting and the distinctive Mysore style of Bharatanatyam flourished under this cultural environment. They kept Kannada alive and thriving in an increasingly multi-cultural, tumultuous period. In 1947, Mysore under Jayachamaraja Wadiyar readily signed the Instrument of Accession, acceding peacefully into the Indian Union.

None of this suggests a romanticisation of monarchy or overlooking its limitations. The political order under the Wadiyars might not have been the perfect one and their achievements can and should be examined critically. But historical criticism is different from historical amnesia. A democratic republic need not endorse hereditary privilege to acknowledge the contributions of institutions and individuals that helped shape its present.

The Mysore Palace is a public heritage monument, but it is also the architectural and emotional centre of a city whose identity was shaped over generations by the Wadiyars. Dasara itself is inseparable from that history, coming as it has been since 1610 when Raja Wadiyar formalised this after the fall of Vijayanagara. The state government is entirely within its rights to organise the festival as a public celebration; equally, the traditional rituals and the family’s association with them deserve informed and respectful coordination. The festival need not become a contest for the government to disparage the royal household.

The protests suggested that for many, the Wadiyars represent a remembered history of public works, cultural patronage and civic identity. Whether one agrees with every demand made by the royal family is beside the point. A minister speaking about an institution of such historical significance must understand the respect that is due and that the subject is larger than the immediate administrative issue.

Power changes hands; governments come and go. What endures is the historical inheritance that each generation receives and is obliged to understand. The danger of historical ignorance in public life goes beyond being offensive. It can lead those entrusted

with preserving a society’s institutions to mistake custody for creation, and legal authority for historical ownership. Mysore’s palace belongs to the public domain in law. Its history, however, cannot be reduced to a government file or the intemperance of a minister.

vikram.sampath@fihcr.com