



Glimpses of Princely Mysore During the Period of Purnayya

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ABSTRACT

As Dewan for over a decade between 1799 and 1811, Purnayya gained the trust and esteem of the British residents and laid the foundations of the modern Mysore state. Over the next 150 years, among all the Princely Indian states, Mysore became the byword for enlightened public administration. The state was characterized by an efficient, orderly and publicly oriented administration; high quality and spirited leadership from a succession of Dewans starting from Purnayya to Mirza Ismail, and perfect amity between the conscientious rulers and their devoted subjects. We need to acknowledge our debt to Purnayya who must rightly be recognized and lauded as the first, eminent civil servant of Mysore. At a time, when heroes are in short supply – especially in the bureaucracy – Purnayya is a role model to all those who believe in the efficacy of public service.

KEYWORDS

Purnayya, Deewan Par Excellence, Shifting Capital, Administration

Introduction:

An attempt is made in this paper to trace the Glimpses of princely Mysore during the period of Purnayya. Purnayya, the first professional Civil Servant and outstanding administrator in adopting the skills of statecraft was a towering Statesman who lived in the 18th & 19th century, steered the Raja's Government of Mysore. In a career spanning over four decades from – 1770 when, at the age of 24, he joined the Royal Mysore Treasury at Srirangapatna as a clerk upto his retirement in 1811 as Dewan, Purnayya served three masters: Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and Krishnaraja Wadiyar with distinction. His working life involved a major transition from service under two Muslim rulers to being enlisted as the chief functionary of an infant ruler – Krishnaraja Wadiyar – placed on the throne by the British in 1799 after the death of Tipu Sultan. Born in a poor but respectable family coming from Coimbatore district, Purnayya was forced to take up a job with a trader who had extensive links with Hyder Ali's court at Srirangapatna. His extraordinary felicity with numbers, sharp memory and innate honesty paved the path for the trust and confidence which Hyder Ali came to repose in Purnayya. In one celebrated instance, the King personally verified the individual items for which accounts had been furnished by Purnayya – only to discover that they tallied completely and that Purnayya himself had presented the figures entirely from memory! Hyder Ali was also impressed with Purnayya's diligence in keeping the accounts.

Purnayya was not merely a trusted accountant of the king. He was intimately involved in Hyder's military troupes as head of the food department commencing with the Second Mysore War, 1780. Towards the end of his reign, Hyder Ali felt the futility of fighting against the British and depending for assistance either from the French or native forces such as the Nizam or the Maharattas. Wilks (Volume II-Historical Sketches of South India) quotes a conversation with Purnayya himself to this effect. It was Purnayya's cool and collected strategy which averted a war of succession immediately after Hyder's death in 1782 between the court favourite Tipu Sultan and his younger brother Abdul Kareem, support up by the late King's maternal uncle. Purnayya's strategy was to keep Hyder's death in tight wraps and wait for Tipu Sultan to come back from his coastal campaign. Immediately thereafter, Tipu Sultan was crowned Sultan and the other conspirators taken into custody at the command of the Minister. Hyder treated Purnayya with unusual respect and affection. In the King's inner circle the Minister were: Mohd Ali, Zumman Khan; Ghasi Khan and two others. Purnayya was by Hyder's side at all time till the latter's death at Narsinga Raopet near Chittoor.

UNDER TIPU SULTAN

Tipu's 17-year reign was marked by wars, bloodshed, strife and finally destruction. The King himself was a keen observer of contemporary affairs and had a modern progressive mind in all state matters. But his consuming hatred for the British, and his strident military campaigns, led to several and continuing endless fight with the British and their allies – the Maharattas and the Nizam – culminating in the third war of Mysore (1792) and finally the forth War (1799) in which Tipu Sultan lost his life and the British established a permanent control over Mysore, which lasted for next 150 years before Indian Independence.

The regular military pitch which marked Tipu's rule in the state has obscured the innovations and farsightedness he displayed in statecraft and economic activities. Early British historians of that period have unfairly portrayed Tipu Sultan as a blood-curdling despot, intolerant towards the minorities, and with an unusually cruel temperament. Later day historians have attempted to redress these distortions by referring to the machinations of the British themselves, the perfidy of their allies and the obsession to block the progress of the French in India. With the assistance of court documents and contemporary evidence, we have a picture of Tipu as being a product of the times, who took up to arms imbued with the spirit of freedom, a fine and fearless warrior and one immersed in improving administration and lessening the burdens on his people. His fine, aesthetic senses leading to the development of several gardens including the celebrated Lalbagh, a priceless library in Srirangapatna (which was looted by the British in 1799), grants and endowments to Hindu Temples and Mutts and the introduction of horticulture and pearl fishing show a Tipu far different from the indicated by the British.

But it is the attitude and relationship between Tipu Sultan and Purnayya that provides the grist for fascinating speculation and conjecture. How did Purnayya a Brahmin – survive and flourish in a theocratic state presided over by Tipu? Except Purnayya, all other key advisors and Ministers were Muslims led by Mir Sadik, reviled subsequently for abusing his office and traitorous acts. Purnayya was also subject to endless court intrigue and back biting from favorites, which would have caused him discomfiture. In those rocky times, many in high offices suffered immediate falls and were summarily jailed, put to various indignities and severely punished, no sooner than losing the ruler's confidence, sometimes on mere suspicion of having conspired against the state. Tipu was an autocratic ruler and his court was riven by intrigue and gamesmanship by his courtiers and ministers. It is therefore, quite extraordinary that Purnayya remained unscathed and intact outlasted the regime. This is attributed, in large measure, to the unshakable

confidence reposed by Tipu and in regard Purnayya was held in by Haidar Ali's wife, whom Tipu used to respect greatly and heed her counsel even on state matters.

PRESSURES AND ENDURANCES

Two instances stand out in corroboration. On one occasion, upon repeated prompting by the other Ministers and advisors, Tipu Sultan is reported to have angrily asked Purnayya to convert to Islam. Purnayya withdrew from the court saying, "I am not your slave". Later, the Sultan's mother advised him not to precipitate the matter and the issue was dropped. In 1799, at the third war of Mysore as the British were advancing towards Srirangapatna and pressing towards the Fort, Tipu Sultan had no hesitation in entrusting his eldest son Fateh Hyder to Purnayya's care and custody along with a standing army. Purnayya and Fateh Haidar were on the other side of the river Cauvery on the fateful day of May 4th, 1799 and unaware until a few days later that the British had breached the fort, broke through the defences and Tipu had perished in the battlefield.

Both Wilks and Hayavadana Rao mention in their narratives that Purnayya was in a minority while championing the claim of Fateh Haidar to the Mysore throne as successor to Tipu Sultan, against the weight sentiment then in favour of restoring the Wadiyars. His reasons for doing so were an amalgam of loyalty to the erstwhile Muslim rulers and shrewdness. Purnayya reasoned that the large Muslim population of the state would not take kindly to the displacement of the ruling family, so soon after the death of Tipu Sultan and that any disaffection on the part of the common people augured poorly for the state. Although this line was not accepted by the British and Col. Arthur Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington), it is conclusive proof that Purnayya was no turncoat and that he remained loyal to his masters who had lifted him from obscurity and placed him in a position of prominence. It also speaks volumes about the man's personality and makeup in going against the sentiment (some would also say community) of reinstating 'Hindu' rule. In this episode, his secularism and adherence to what he believed to be state interest comes out to the fore.

Krishnaraja Wadiyar was an infant of 4 years when he was crowned King of Mysore. The British did not have to search far and wide in naming a Dewan (Prime Minister), who would effectively double up as Regent during the minority status of the King. Purnayya was recognized as eminently suitable for this position in view of his uncompromising integrity, experience in statecraft and knowledge of men and matters. It was indeed quite remarkable that there was so very little hesitation on the part of the British in appointing him as the Dewan, not withstanding his three decades long association with Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. His great qualities must have all come to the fore. Equally, that Purnayya's appointment generated no controversy in the state is a testimony to his administrative skills and objectivity. Purnayya's continuity in Government, despite the changes in the regime and leadership buttresses the claim that he be regarded as a 'professional' civil servant, loyal to state interest and surviving on the basis of capacity and skills.

DEWAN PAR EXCELLENCE

As Dewan of Mysore for over a decade between 1799 to 1811, Purnayya provided a special and distinct licence to the state administration. His first task was to restore order following the disastrous wars with the British and their allies, which had ravaged the state. This included restitution of respect for civil authority, which was attempted by reorganizing the revenue administration. Purnayya was also a fiscal conservative. Augmentation of resources and efficient collections were fine tuned with cutting down wasteful expenses, pruning hereditary and public offices and minimizing the economic burdens on the populace. There was, within a few years, a remarkable turnaround in state finances and a surplus position was reached.

Purnayya's tenure is specially noteworthy for the initiatives in Public Works, reorganization of State Finances, Judicial Ad-

ministration and Military Reform. Tanks and Channels, in a deplorable condition because of repeated wars, were restored all over the State. Travellers Bungalow were located in all parts of the state including remote areas. These facilitated frequent tours by Officers and Department heads. Indeed, the close relationship that developed between the Administration and the people was an enduring facet of Princely Mysore. Among the major works undertaken during his period were a dam that was constructed at Sagarkatte across River Lakshmana Thirtha, together with a 23 miles channel for increasing water flows, a stone bridge, constructed across the River Cauvery connecting Srirangapatna with Kirangur, was dedicated to Governor General Wellesley and stands till this day. Availability of water for irrigation and regular cropping produced bumper harvests and helped turn Mysore State into a "Green Paradise".

At a special investiture in 1807, the Maharaja honored Purnayya for his services. Later, at the insistence of the British, the Jagir of Yelandur taluk was assigned to Purnayya and his heirs as recognition of his great contribution to Mysore state. British residents who served in Mysore during that period, Governors at Madras and the Governor General, including Sir Arthur Wellesley, were all effusive in their praise for Purnayya, for his undoubted commitment to the welfare of the state and its residents and his wise and far reaching policies. After over 4 decades of public service, Purnayya retired in 1811 and settled down at Yelandur. He passed away in 1812 at the age of 66 in Srirangapatna.

This was truly a remarkable and inspiring life. From poor, obscure origins, Purnayya reached the most coveted positions in the state administration relying largely on his acumen, insights and abilities. He was faithful but never obsequious; loyal but hardly a camp follower or sycophant. Legend has it that, in some matter concerning negotiations with the Maharattas, which had reached a delicate stage, Purnayya told Tipu Sultan that both of them were individually unsuitable in pursuing the task because "While you (Tipu) can never speak the truth, I (Purnayya) can never lie". The trust in him by Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and later the British owed to his steadfast nature and commitment to public interest.

Purnayya's specific contributions to the state administration in the regimes of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan was also remarkable that he participated in various military achievements of that period, belying the notion of an armchair theorist, which most people of his like were indeed. His position was a little worsened under Tipu Sultan, particularly in the face of the aggressive theocratic intentions of the state and the open hostility, which his status as Minister invoked from others considered close to Tipu. The writings of Kirmani, the court biographer of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan display his distrust and hardly concealed hostility towards Purnayya. That he survived this period is hence quite extraordinary and display his matchless temperament and resolve in the face of adversity.

CHARACTER SKETCH

As Dewan for over a decade between 1799 and 1811, Purnayya gained the trust and esteem of the British residents and laid the foundations of the modern Mysore state. Over the next 150 years, among all the Princely Indian states, Mysore became the byword for enlightened public administration. The state was characterized by an efficient, orderly and publicly oriented administration; high quality and spirited leadership from a succession of Dewans starting from Purnayya to Mirza Ismail, and perfect amity between the conscientious rulers and their devoted subjects. We need to acknowledge our debt to Purnayya who must rightly be recognized and lauded as the first, eminent civil servant of Mysore. At a time, when heroes are in short supply – especially in the bureaucracy – Purnayya is a role model to all those who believe in the efficacy of public service.

On the eve of his departure from India, Governor General Wellesley (later Duke Wellington) had said this to Purnayya as farewell:

“To the extraordinary abilities, eminent public zeal, integrity and judgement and energy of that distinguished Minister must be ascribed in a considerable degree, the success of the measures which I originally adopted for the settlement of Mysore and the happy and prosperous conditions of that flourishing country. The merits and policies of the Dewan have been particularly evident in the promptitude and wisdom manifested in him, in the application of the resources of Mysore to the exigencies of the public service ... and I deem it to be an act of Justice to acknowledge that the expectations which I formed in selecting Purnayya for the important office of Minister of Mysore have been greatly exceeded by the benefits which have resulted from his excellent administration”.

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