
**Early National Awakening in Karnataka:
The Role of Libraries and Economic Issues in
Shaping Regional Nationalism**

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ABSTRACT:

The early national awakening in Karnataka, spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a multidimensional process shaped by educational, economic, and cultural factors. This study examines how grassroots initiatives such as public libraries, literary societies, and cooperative movements fostered political consciousness and regional nationalism. Libraries emerged as pivotal centres for disseminating nationalist literature, promoting literacy, and facilitating critical discussions on colonial policies and social reform. Simultaneously, economic grievances—including agrarian distress, exploitative land revenue systems, indebtedness, and the decline of traditional industries—mobilized local populations toward collective action. By analysing historical records, library networks, economic protests, and cooperative societies, this research highlights the interconnectedness of education, economic awareness, and political activism. The findings demonstrate that Karnataka's early national awakening was not limited to elite leadership but was a community-driven movement in which literacy, access to information, and economic empowerment played central roles. The study underscores the significance of local institutions and economic consciousness in shaping regional identity and contributing meaningfully to India's broader struggle for independence.

KEYWORDS:

Public Libraries, Economic Grievances, Agrarian Distress, Colonial Policies, Cooperative Societies, Grassroots Political Mobilization, Kannada Sahitya Parishat.

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1. Introduction

Karnataka, with its rich cultural and educational heritage, played a critical role in India's early nationalist movements. While mainstream narratives often focus on metropolitan centres, Karnataka's experience demonstrates that regional consciousness and grassroots activism were central to India's struggle for independence. The early national awakening in Karnataka emerged from the convergence of education, economic awareness, and cultural identity.

Libraries, literary societies, and educational institutions served as hubs for spreading nationalist ideas, promoting literacy, and fostering critical engagement with colonial policies. Simultaneously, economic grievances—including oppressive land revenue systems, indebtedness among peasants, decline of traditional industries, and exploitation under colonial rule—galvanized local communities into political action.

This study examines how educational and economic factors reinforced each other, creating a politically conscious and mobilized citizenry. By analysing library movements, cooperative societies, and historical protests, the research highlights the multidimensional nature of Karnataka's early national awakening. The study further emphasizes that the movement was not confined to elite leadership but was a community-driven phenomenon, demonstrating the transformative power of literacy, access to information, and economic empowerment in shaping regional nationalism.

2. Historical Context of Karnataka's National Awakening

The late 19th century in Karnataka was marked by political awakening, social reform, and the emergence of regional identity. Institutions such as the Sarvajanik Sabha (founded 1892) and the Mysore Political Association provided forums for debate on political and economic issues. These organizations addressed oppressive British policies, including high land revenue demands, lack of access to education, and the marginalization of local industries.¹

Princely states in Karnataka, such as Mysore and Hyderabad Karnataka, offered differing political contexts. Mysore, under rulers like Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, encouraged modern education, library development, and cultural institutions, fostering intellectual engagement and social reform.² In contrast, Hyderabad Karnataka faced strict administrative controls and economic hardships, which intensified dissatisfaction among

peasants and artisans.³

Earlier rebellions, such as the Kittur Rebellion (1824–1825), inspired later resistance and contributed to the growth of regional consciousness. By the early 20th century, grassroots movements were increasingly tied to educational and economic concerns, creating the foundation for Karnataka's participation in India's broader nationalist struggle.⁴

3. Role of Libraries in National Awakening

Libraries emerged as critical instruments for education, social reform, and political awareness. They were not mere repositories of books but centres for discussion, debate, and dissemination of nationalist ideas.

3.1 Public Library Movement

The library movement gained momentum in both urban and rural Karnataka during the early 20th century. Hyderabad Karnataka, in particular, saw the rise of community libraries funded by progressive citizens and local elites. These libraries provided access to nationalist literature, newspapers, and journals often restricted by colonial authorities.⁵ They became meeting places for intellectuals, educators, and freedom fighters.

For example, the City Central Library in Hubballi–Dharwad organized lectures, workshops, and cultural activities, fostering literacy and critical thinking among citizens.⁶ These libraries encouraged citizens to question colonial authority, discuss social and economic grievances, and engage in nationalist movements.

3.2 Promotion of Regional Language Literature

Libraries also promoted Kannada literature to reach wider audiences, ensuring that nationalist ideas were accessible to those unable to read English. The Kannada Sahitya Parishat supported library development and literary activities with subtle nationalist undertones, strengthening regional identity while fostering Indian nationalism.⁷

3.3 Libraries as Platforms for Political Awareness

Libraries served as platforms for political and economic awareness. Public readings, debates, and lectures educated citizens about colonial policies, economic exploitation, and social reform initiatives. Pamphlets, newspapers, and journals circulated in these libraries contributed to the formation of a politically conscious and mobilized citizenry.⁸

Table 1: Key Libraries, Movements, and Leaders in Karnataka's Early National Awakening

Library / Institution	Location	Role in National Awakening	Notable Leaders / Contributors	Period / Years Active
City Central Library	Hubballi-Dharwad	Access to nationalist literature, literacy promotion, debates	Aluru Venkata Rao, H. S. Nanjundappa	Early 20th century
Kannada Sahitya Parishat Libraries	Bengaluru, Mysore	Promoted Kannada literature, cultural nationalism	Aluru Venkata Rao, M. Ramachandra	From 1915 onwards
Sarvajanic Sabha Library	Belagavi	Political discussions, petitions against colonial policies	Local elites, social reformers	1892 onwards
Government / Public Libraries of Mysore	Mysore	Educational hub, access to newspapers and journals	Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV (patronage)	Late 19th – early 20th c.
Community Libraries (Hyderabad Karnataka)	Raichur, Gulbarga	Spread literacy, nationalist pamphlets, facilitated local political meetings	Local freedom fighters, teachers	Early 20th century
Cooperative Society Libraries	Rural Karnataka	Economic education, credit awareness, organizing local activism	Farmers' leaders, cooperative organizers	Early 20th century

4. Economic Issues and Their Impact on National Consciousness

Economic grievances were central to Karnataka's early nationalist awakening. Colonial and princely state policies disrupted traditional economic structures, causing distress among farmers, artisans, and labourers.

4.1 Agrarian Distress

High land revenue under British rule and Nizam administration placed immense financial pressure on peasants. Combined with exploitative moneylenders, these policies caused indebtedness, forced land sales, and famine conditions in some regions.⁹ Such hardships fuelled resentment against colonial and feudal authorities and catalysed anti-tax protests and agrarian mobilization.

4.2 Industrial and Trade Exploitation

Colonial policies undermined traditional industries such as weav-

ing, handicrafts, and ironworks.¹⁰ Imported British goods replaced local products, causing unemployment and economic insecurity. Artisans and traders often participated in protests and nationalist movements to defend their livelihoods.

4.3 Cooperative Societies as Economic Relief

Cooperative societies emerged as a grassroots response to economic hardship. These organizations provided credit, savings facilities, and mutual support, while also developing leadership and organizational skills among citizens.¹¹ Cooperatives not only alleviated financial stress but also strengthened solidarity and political awareness, linking economic empowerment with nationalist mobilization.

Table 2: Key Economic Movements and Protests in Karnataka (Late 19th–Early 20th Century)

Movement / Protest	Region	Cause / Economic Issue	Impact on National Awakening	Leaders / Contributors
Kittur Rebellion (1824–25)	Belagavi	Land revenue exploitation, feudal oppression	Inspired later nationalist movements	Rani Chennamma
Anti-Nizam Tax Protests	Hyderabad Karnataka	High taxation, agrarian distress	Mobilized farmers, linked economic and political awareness	Local peasant leaders
Weaver and Artisan Movements	Mysore, Bangalore	Competition from British imports, unemployment	Economic grievances tied to nationalist sentiment	Artisans' guild leaders
Cooperative Societies Formation	Rural Karnataka	Lack of access to credit, indebtedness	Promoted economic solidarity, leadership skills	Farmers' leaders
Agrarian Protests in Raichur & Gulbarga	Hyderabad Karnataka	High land revenue, indebtedness, famine conditions	Linked economic hardship with nationalist activism	Local village leaders, educators

5. Interplay between Libraries, Economic Issues, and National Awakening

Karnataka's early national awakening was shaped by the synergistic relationship between education, economic grievances, and political mobilization. Libraries, literary societies, and cooperative institutions served as complementary mechanisms that nurtured a politically con-

scious and socially active population.

- **Education and Literacy as Catalysts:** Public libraries and literary societies were not passive centres of reading; they were active hubs of debate, discussion, and critical reflection. By providing access to nationalist pamphlets, journals, newspapers, and Kannada literature, libraries enabled citizens—including peasants, artisans, and students—to understand the exploitative policies of colonial administration and the broader philosophy of Indian nationalism. Literacy empowered individuals to interpret, critique, and disseminate ideas, creating a knowledge-driven foundation for political activism.¹²
- **Economic Awareness as Motivation:** Economic hardship under colonial policies—such as high land revenue, indebtedness, famine, and decline of traditional industries—created urgent local concerns. These grievances made people more receptive to nationalist ideas, as education provided the intellectual framework to understand their economic oppression as part of a larger systemic exploitation. Citizens could then link their personal and communal hardships to colonial governance, fostering collective consciousness and solidarity.¹³
- **Libraries as Forums for Collective Mobilization:** Libraries became venues where citizens convened to discuss both social and economic issues. Farmers, artisans, teachers, and students could engage in informed debates about political reforms, cooperative initiatives, and strategies for resistance. These discussions often translated into organized community action, such as petitions, protests, and the formation of cooperative societies to address economic needs.
- **Cooperative Societies Bridging Education and Economic Action:** Cooperative movements complemented the library network by transforming awareness into practical action. They provided credit, savings, and financial literacy, enabling communities to mitigate economic distress while simultaneously nurturing leadership, organizational skills, and community solidarity. Citizens involved in cooperative societies often became leaders in nationalist movements, demonstrating the tangible link between economic empowerment and political participation.¹⁴
- **Cultural and Regional Identity as Reinforcement:** The promotion of Kannada literature and regional culture through libraries and literary

societies strengthened a sense of regional pride. This cultural nationalism worked alongside political and economic mobilization, creating a holistic awakening where identity, literacy, and economic consciousness reinforced each other. The movement was therefore inclusive, involving not only urban elites but also rural peasants, artisans, and women, all of whom contributed to the broader nationalist struggle.

In essence, Karnataka's early national awakening was multidimensional: literacy and education provided awareness, economic grievances created motivation, libraries offered forums for debate, and cooperative societies enabled practical community organization. The interaction of these elements created a grassroots-based, participatory, and resilient movement that strengthened both regional and national nationalism.

6. Conclusion

The early national awakening in Karnataka illustrates that regional nationalism in India was a product of interconnected educational, economic, and cultural forces. Libraries and literary societies served as active centres for literacy, intellectual engagement, and dissemination of nationalist ideas, making political awareness accessible to diverse sections of society. Simultaneously, economic grievances such as agrarian distress, indebtedness, unemployment, and the decline of traditional industries provided both urgency and motivation for mobilization.

Cooperative societies complemented these educational initiatives by providing financial literacy, access to credit, and leadership opportunities. Together, libraries and cooperative movements ensured that Karnataka's nationalist awakening was inclusive and community-driven, bridging gaps between intellectual discourse and practical action. Grassroots mobilization, informed debate, and collective action created a population that was both politically conscious and economically empowered.

Moreover, the promotion of Kannada literature and regional cultural identity reinforced the nationalist ethos, demonstrating that cultural awareness and pride could coexist with political and economic activism. Karnataka's experience shows that successful grassroots nationalist movements required the integration of knowledge, economic empowerment, and social solidarity.

In conclusion, Karnataka's early national awakening was not a

narrow political event; it was a holistic, multidimensional movement. Literacy, libraries, economic awareness, and cooperative action combined to create a socially conscious, politically active, and culturally proud citizenry. The state's contributions highlight the significance of local institutions and grassroots initiatives in shaping regional and national identity, emphasizing that India's struggle for independence was strengthened not only by elite leadership but also by informed and empowered communities at the local level.

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