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THE ROLE OF LAWYERS FROM KARNATAKA IN INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Karnataka, Freedom Struggle, Lawyers, Indian National Congress, Karnataka Unification</i>	Karnataka's contribution to the Indian freedom movement is frequently narrated through the lens of mass leaders, poets, and revolutionaries, yet one of its most consequential features has been the sustained and multidimensional participation of the legal profession. This paper examines how lawyers trained in the courts of the Bombay Presidency, the Madras Presidency, and the princely State of Mysore emerged as organisers, orators, negotiators, and institution-builders of the national movement in the Karnataka region. Drawing on the careers of figures such as Gangadhar Rao Deshpande, S. Nijalingappa, Kadidal Manjappa, Nittoor Srinivasa Rau, Karnad Sadashiva Rao, R. R. Diwakar, and several lesser-documented advocates of the Bombay-Karnataka, Hyderabad-Karnataka, and Mysore regions, the paper argues that lawyers occupied a distinctive structural position: trained in colonial law yet increasingly disillusioned with colonial governance, articulate in both English and Kannada, and possessed of the organisational skills required to build the Congress apparatus at the district



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	and taluk level. The study traces their role across the Swadeshi movement, the Home Rule agitation, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, the Quit India Movement, the unique struggle for the unification of Karnataka, and the framing of the post-colonial constitutional order. It concludes that the willingness of Karnataka's lawyers to sacrifice lucrative practice, court arrest, and forfeit their sanads (licences to practise) was not incidental but central to converting scattered nationalist sentiment into an organised regional movement.
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1. Introduction

The Indian freedom struggle drew its leadership disproportionately from the legal profession. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Chittaranjan Das, Motilal Nehru, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah were all lawyers before they were nationalist leaders. This pattern was replicated with remarkable consistency in Karnataka, where the modern legal profession, introduced through the colonial court system of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies and the princely State of Mysore, produced a generation of Kannadiga advocates, vakils, and pleaders who became the backbone of the regional nationalist movement. Karnataka in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was administratively fragmented across the Bombay-Karnataka districts (Belgaum, Dharwad, Bijapur, North Kanara), Hyderabad-Karnataka (Gulbarga, Bidar, Raichur), the coastal districts under the Madras Presidency (South Kanara), and the princely State of Mysore. This fragmentation meant that no single legislature, court, or administrative centre linked the Kannada-speaking people; it was, in large part, the mobility and professional networks of lawyers moving between district courts, bar associations, and Congress sessions that knitted together a shared political consciousness across these disparate regions.

Legal training gave these men three advantages that proved indispensable to the freedom movement. First, it gave them command over the English language and a working knowledge of colonial statute and procedure, enabling them to challenge the government on its own terms in petitions, courtroom defences, and public memoranda. Second, the profession provided an independent income that, unlike government service, could not easily be threatened by the colonial state — though, as this paper shows, many lawyers ultimately sacrificed precisely this independence by boycotting the courts or facing disbarment. Third, legal practice cultivated the rhetorical and organisational skills of persuasion, negotiation, and public speaking that translated directly into effective political leadership at public meetings, satyagrahas, and Congress committee work.

This paper studies the role of Karnataka's lawyers across the principal phases of the national movement: the Swadeshi and extremist phase (1905–1915), the Home Rule and early Gandhian phase (1916–1922), the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements (1920–1934), the Quit India Movement (1942), and the subsequent movement for the linguistic unification of Karnataka (1946–1956), which many of the same lawyer-leaders carried forward into the post-independence period. It also considers their later role in constitution-making and early state-building, arguing that the transition of these men from courtroom advocates to legislators and ministers was a direct continuation of the skills and networks built during the freedom struggle.



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2. Objectives of the Study

- To document the participation of lawyers from the Karnataka region in the various phases of the Indian freedom struggle.
- To analyse the specific skills and social position that the legal profession contributed to nationalist organisation in Karnataka.
- To examine individual case studies of prominent lawyer-freedom fighters from the Bombay-Karnataka, Mysore, Hyderabad-Karnataka, and coastal Karnataka regions.
- To assess the significance of the boycott of law courts as a form of nationalist protest and its costs to the individuals involved.
- To trace the continuity between the legal-nationalist leadership of the freedom struggle and the subsequent movement for the unification of Karnataka and early democratic governance of the state.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology. It is based on secondary sources, including biographical accounts, state gazetteers, records of the Indian National Congress, published autobiographies and memoirs of the leaders discussed, and existing historical scholarship on the freedom movement in the Bombay-Karnataka and Mysore regions. The approach combines descriptive historical narrative with thematic analysis, organising the discussion around key movements and individual biographical case studies rather than a strict chronological account. Given the regionally fragmented administrative history of pre-1956 Karnataka, the paper uses “Karnataka” in the cultural-linguistic sense common in nationalist historiography, encompassing Kannada-speaking lawyers of the Bombay-Karnataka districts, Mysore State, Hyderabad-Karnataka, and South Kanara, while noting the specific administrative unit each individual operated within at the relevant time.

4. Karnataka's Legal Fraternity and the Rise of Nationalist Consciousness

Administrative Fragmentation of the Pre-Unification Karnataka Region

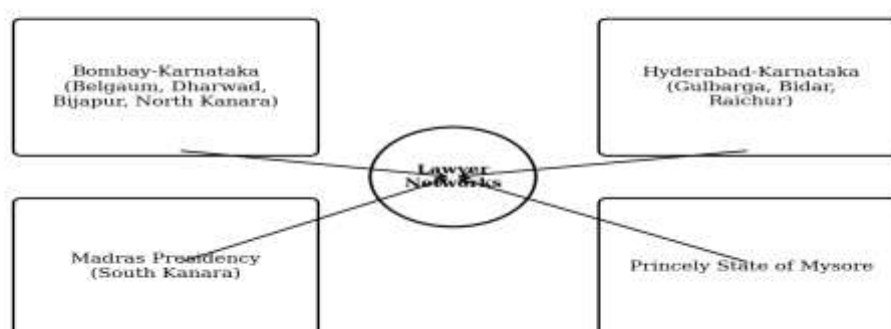


Figure 1: Administrative fragmentation of the pre-unification Karnataka region across four jurisdictions, linked through lawyers' professional networks.



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The roots of legal-nationalist activism in Karnataka lie in the Swadeshi movement that followed the partition of Bengal in 1905. Bal Gangadhar Tilak's visits to the Bombay-Karnataka districts, and his call for Swadeshi Prasar (propagation of indigenous goods), Videshi Bahishkar (boycott of foreign goods), National Education, and Swaraj, found some of their most committed followers among the pleaders and vakils of Belgaum, Dharwad, and Bijapur. Gangadhar Rao Deshpande of Belgaum and Srinivasrao Kaujalagi of Bijapur emerged during this period as Tilak's principal lieutenants in the region, using their standing in local bar associations and their fluency in both Kannada and Marathi to carry the Swadeshi message into small towns that larger national leaders rarely visited.

The bar libraries and district court premises of towns such as Belgaum, Dharwad, Hubli, and Bijapur functioned as informal political clubs where lawyers discussed nationalist newspapers, organised subscriptions for the *Kesari* and other nationalist journals, and planned public meetings under the guise of professional gatherings. This social infrastructure proved critical when the Indian National Congress began building formal district and taluk committees after 1920: lawyers, already networked across the region through their professional travel to attend court sessions, were natural choices to head these committees. The Karnataka Provincial Congress Committee (KPCC), formed after the Nagpur Congress of 1920 granted Karnataka its own Congress unit, drew heavily on this lawyer-led network, with Gangadhar Rao Deshpande becoming its first president.

5. Pioneering Lawyer-Leaders of the Freedom Struggle

This section presents case studies of prominent lawyers from the Karnataka region whose careers illustrate the range of contributions — from mass mobilisation to constitutional statesmanship — that the legal profession brought to the freedom movement.

5.1 Gangadharrao Balkrishna Deshpande — “The Lion of Karnataka” (1871–1960)

Gangadharrao Deshpande of Hudli in Belgaum district is widely regarded as the foremost lawyer-nationalist of the Karnataka region. Trained in law and initially drawn to the extremist politics of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, whom he regarded as his political guru, Deshpande organised public meetings, boycotts of foreign cloth, and propaganda tours across the Bombay-Karnataka districts during the Swadeshi movement. He later transitioned to Gandhian methods, defying the Salt Act by selling contraband salt during the 1930 Salt Satyagraha and courting arrest on the same day. His most celebrated organisational achievement was hosting and coordinating the 1924 Belgaum Session of the Indian National Congress — the only Congress session Mahatma Gandhi ever presided over — which drew thousands of delegates and volunteers and gave the Karnataka movement national visibility. Deshpande went on to serve as the first president of the Karnataka Provincial Congress Committee, was imprisoned during the Quit India Movement of 1942, and was later consulted by the States Reorganisation process. His epithets, “Karnataka Kesari” (Lion of Karnataka) and “Khadi Bhageeratha of Karnataka,” reflect both his political stature and his lifelong promotion of khadi and village industries.

5.2 Siddavanahalli Nijalingappa (1902–2000)

S. Nijalingappa took his law degree from Poona in 1926 and began practising as an advocate in Davanagere and Chitradurga. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Rajendra Prasad, he entered active Congress politics in the Mysore region in the 1930s, rising from volunteer to President of the Chitaldrug District Congress



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Committee in 1936. His participation in the Forest Satyagraha of 1939 cost him his bar licence, and he was imprisoned on multiple occasions between 1939 and 1947 for his role in the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements. After independence, Nijalingappa became a member of the Constituent Assembly (1946–1950), and he subsequently led the movement for the linguistic unification of Kannada-speaking areas into a single state, serving as the first Chief Minister of the unified Mysore State (later renamed Karnataka) upon its formation in 1956. He later became President of the All India Congress Committee in 1968, making him one of the few Karnataka lawyer-freedom fighters to attain leadership at the national level of the Congress organisation.

5.3 Kadidal Manjappa (1908–1992)

Kadidal Manjappa obtained his law degree from Poona and began practising as an advocate in Shimoga in 1935. Within three years, influenced by his 1927 meeting with Gandhi, he gave up his legal practice to participate in the 1938 Shivapura (Vidurashwatha-adjacent) flag satyagraha near Maddur, one of the defining episodes of civil disobedience within the princely State of Mysore, and subsequently in the Quit India Movement, for which he was imprisoned. After independence, Manjappa returned to public life as a minister responsible for revenue and public works, steering key land-reform legislation including the abolition of absentee landlordism, before briefly serving as the third Chief Minister of Mysore State in 1956 — a tenure during which the Vidhana Soudha, the seat of Karnataka's state legislature, was formally inaugurated.

5.4 Nittoor Srinivasa Rau (1903–2004)

Nittoor Srinivasa Rau completed his law degree at Madras Law College in 1927 and began legal practice in Bangalore. Deeply influenced by Gandhi — he sought and received Gandhi's personal permission in 1927 to translate the Mahatma's autobiography into Kannada, publishing it under the title *Satyashodhana* — Rau joined the Indian National Congress and actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s and 1940s within Mysore State, running the Congress state unit office in Dharwad in 1932. His later career exemplified the transition of freedom-movement lawyers into independent India's legal and administrative institutions: he became the first chairman of the Mysore State Bar Council in 1952, Advocate General of Mysore State in 1953, Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court in 1961, and India's first Central Vigilance Commissioner in 1964, in addition to serving as acting Governor of Mysore State.

5.5 Karnad Sadashiva Rao (Mangalore)

Karnad Sadashiva Rao of Mangalore is remembered as the first person from Karnataka to join Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha movement as a volunteer. A lawyer by training, he combined his legal career with sustained social work, founding the Mahila Sabha in Mangalore to support widows and destitute women, reflecting the broader pattern among Karnataka's lawyer-nationalists of pairing political activism with social reform. His contribution is commemorated today through Sadashivanagar in Bengaluru and K. S. Road in Mangalore.

5.6 Ranganath Ramachandra Diwakar (R. R. Diwakar)

R. R. Diwakar was among the prominent leaders of the Bombay-Karnataka region associated with Gangadhar Rao Deshpande in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–32, for which he was imprisoned. He went on



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to a long career in journalism, Congress organisational work, and eventually national public life, including a term as a Union minister and Governor of Bihar after independence, illustrating how the organisational apprenticeship gained in the freedom movement translated into sustained careers in post-colonial public administration.

5.7 Kyasamballi Chengalaraya Reddy (K. C. Reddy)

K. C. Reddy founded the Praja Paksha (People's Party) in Mysore State immediately after completing his law degree in 1930, with the explicit aim of securing responsible, representative government within the princely state. His party later merged its efforts with the Indian National Congress in the movement for Mysore's accession to the Indian Union, and Reddy became the first Chief Minister of Mysore State in 1947, underscoring how legal training in Mysore, as in British India, directly seeded the leadership of the responsible-government and integration movements.

5.8 The Wider Fraternity of Lawyer-Activists

Beyond these prominent figures, the freedom movement in Karnataka was sustained by a much larger fraternity of lesser-documented lawyer-activists whose collective, district-level work gave the movement its depth. These included Srinivasrao Kaujalagi of Bijapur, one of Tilak's earliest Karnataka followers; Dattopant Karmarkar (D. P. Karmarkar), associated with the Civil Disobedience leadership alongside Deshpande and Diwakar; Hardekar Manjappa, active in the Non-Cooperation and later movements in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region; and numerous pleaders and vakils across Dharwad, Hubli, Bagalkot, Gadag, and Mangalore who organised local Congress committees, defended satyagrahis in court, and, in many documented instances, formally boycotted legal practice during the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–22 in response to Gandhi's call. Contemporary accounts of the period specifically note that lawyers in Karnataka boycotted their practice en masse alongside government employees who resigned their posts and students who left government-aided institutions, marking the legal profession as a distinct and visible constituency of the non-cooperation campaign.

6. Summary of Selected Lawyer-Freedom Fighters of Karnataka

The table below summarises the regional origin, movement association, and principal post-independence role of the lawyer-leaders discussed in this paper, illustrating the geographical spread of legal-nationalist activity across the pre-unification Karnataka region.

Name	Region / District	Key Movement(s)	Later Public Role
Gangadharrao Deshpande	Belgaum (Bombay-Karnataka)	Swadeshi; Non-Cooperation; Civil Disobedience; Quit India	First President, KPCC
S. Nijalingappa	Chitradurga / Mysore State	Civil Disobedience; Quit India; Unification	First CM of unified Mysore State; AICC



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Name	Region / District	Key Movement(s)	Later Public Role
		movement	President
Kadidal Manjappa	Shimoga (Mysore State)	Shivapura Satyagraha (1938); Quit India	Third CM of Mysore State
Nittoor Srinivasa Rau	Bangalore (Mysore State)	Civil Disobedience Movement	Advocate General; Chief Justice; first CVC
Karnad Sadashiva Rao	Mangalore (South Kanara)	Early Gandhian Satyagraha volunteer	Social reform, women's welfare work
R. R. Diwakar	Bombay-Karnataka	Civil Disobedience Movement	Union Minister; Governor of Bihar
K. C. Reddy	Mysore State	Responsible Government movement	First CM of Mysore State
Srinivasrao Kaujalagi	Bijapur (Bombay-Karnataka)	Swadeshi; Non-Cooperation	District Congress leadership

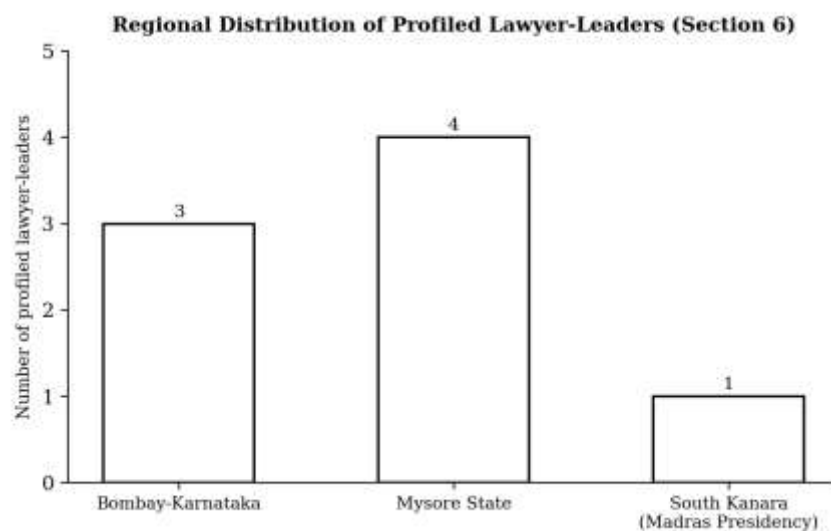


Figure 2: Regional distribution of the lawyer-leaders profiled in Section 6.



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7. Lawyers and the Major Phases of the National Movement

Timeline: Phases of the National Movement and Karnataka's Lawyer-Leaders

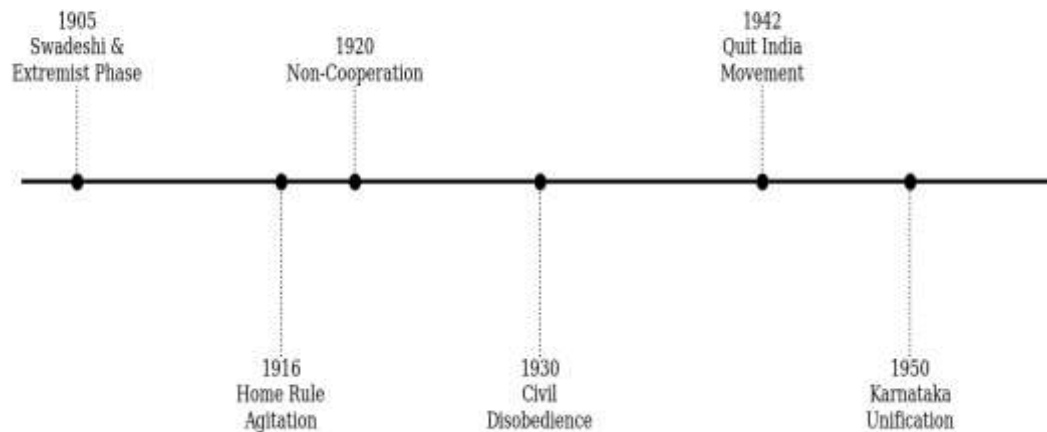


Figure 3: Timeline of the major phases of the national movement and their bearing on Karnataka's lawyer-leaders, 1905–1956.

7.1 The Swadeshi and Extremist Phase (1905–1915)

During the agitation against the partition of Bengal, Karnataka's lawyer-nationalists functioned primarily as propagandists and organisers of the boycott of foreign goods. Public burnings of foreign cloth in Belgaum, Navalgund, Hanagal, and Dharwad were frequently organised or addressed by local pleaders, who used their standing in the community and their oratorical training to draw crowds and sustain the boycott over months rather than days.

7.2 Non-Cooperation and the Boycott of the Courts (1920–1922)

Mahatma Gandhi's call for non-cooperation placed Karnataka's lawyers at a direct point of personal sacrifice: to answer the call fully required suspending the very practice that gave them their livelihood and social standing. Multiple contemporary accounts confirm that lawyers across the Karnataka districts boycotted their practice in significant numbers alongside the broader withdrawal from government schools, colleges, and services, and this collective gesture is recorded as one of the most visible signs of nationalist commitment in the region during this period.

7.3 Civil Disobedience and the Salt Satyagraha (1930–1934)

The Civil Disobedience Movement, launched with Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930, drew large numbers of volunteers from Hubli and Belgaum. Lawyer-leaders such as Deshpande, Diwakar, Karmarkar, and Kaujalagi led the movement in the northern Karnataka districts, while in Mysore State, where direct participation in British Indian civil disobedience was legally more constrained, lawyers such as Nijalingappa and Nittoor



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Srinivasa Rau built parallel Congress organisation and later joined equivalent state-level satyagrahas such as the Mysore Chalo and Vidurashwatha movements. The scale of northern Karnataka's participation was such that British administrators themselves reported the region as more active in civil disobedience than Gujarat, leading to Karnataka being popularly termed the “Gandhi Province.”

7.4 Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement saw the arrest of nearly every prominent lawyer-leader discussed in this paper: Deshpande, Nijalingappa, and Manjappa were all imprisoned in connection with the movement, reflecting the maturity of the Congress organisational network these lawyers had spent two decades building. In the princely State of Mysore, where the Congress was technically a proscribed organisation for much of this period, participation carried the additional risk of confrontation with the Mysore Durbar administration, not merely the British Raj.

7.5 The Movement for the Unification of Karnataka (1946–1956)

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of Karnataka's freedom-movement lawyers lies in the campaign that followed independence: the unification of the scattered Kannada-speaking districts of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, Hyderabad State, and Mysore State into a single linguistic state. Leaders such as Nijalingappa, who presided over the Karnataka Ekikarana Maha Samiti formed in 1947, applied the same organisational methods — rallies, petitions, and sustained lobbying of the central government — that had been honed during the freedom struggle, arguing the case before the States Reorganisation Commission of 1953–55. This continuity underlines the paper's central argument: the legal-nationalist leadership of Karnataka's freedom struggle did not disband with independence in 1947 but redirected its energies toward the unfinished task of linguistic and administrative unification, culminating in the formation of Mysore State (renamed Karnataka in 1973) on 1 November 1956.

8. From Courtroom to Constitution: Post-Independence Continuities

The transition of Karnataka's freedom-movement lawyers into the institutions of independent India was neither accidental nor merely careerist; it reflected a coherent belief, shared with the wider all-India Congress leadership, that the skills of constitutional argument and legislative drafting developed in legal practice were directly applicable to the work of nation-building. Nijalingappa's membership of the Constituent Assembly (1946–1950), Nittoor Srinivasa Rau's later role as Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court and India's first Central Vigilance Commissioner, and the near-universal absorption of the lawyer-freedom fighters discussed above into the first cabinets of Mysore State exemplify this continuity. In several cases — most notably Manjappa's Tenancy Act and Inam Abolition legislation — the legal training that had once been used to defend satyagrahis in colonial courts was redirected toward drafting the land-reform statutes that reshaped rural Karnataka's agrarian structure in the 1950s and 1960s.

9. Significance and Legacy

The sustained involvement of lawyers in Karnataka's freedom struggle carries significance beyond individual biography. First, it demonstrates how a colonial institution — the modern legal profession, created to administer British justice — was repurposed by its own practitioners into an instrument of resistance against



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the colonial state itself. Second, the mobility of lawyers across district courts gave the Karnataka movement a regional coherence that the political geography of the time, split across four separate administrative units, would not otherwise have permitted. Third, the willingness of men such as Deshpande, Nijalingappa, and Manjappa to forfeit income, professional standing, and, in some cases, their licence to practise (as happened to Nijalingappa after the 1939 Forest Satyagraha) provided a visible and costly signal of commitment that helped legitimise the wider non-cooperation campaign among the public. Finally, the smooth transition of this leadership into the constitutional and legislative institutions of independent Mysore State and later Karnataka ensured a degree of continuity and institutional memory between the freedom struggle and the early decades of democratic self-government that is a distinctive feature of Karnataka's political history.

10. Conclusion

Lawyers from Karnataka were not peripheral participants in the Indian freedom struggle but among its principal regional architects. From Gangadhar Rao Deshpande's leadership of the Swadeshi and Non-Cooperation movements and his stewardship of the historic 1924 Belgaum Congress, to Nijalingappa's and Manjappa's imprisonment during Civil Disobedience and Quit India and their subsequent leadership of the unified state of Mysore, to Nittoor Srinivasa Rau's journey from Congress volunteer to Chief Justice and Central Vigilance Commissioner, the careers surveyed in this paper reveal a consistent pattern: legal training equipped a generation of Kannadigas with the language, credibility, and organisational capacity to convert scattered nationalist sentiment into sustained political action, and subsequently to carry that same capacity into the work of constitution-making, land reform, and the unification of the Kannada-speaking people into a single state. Their legacy endures in the institutions of Karnataka and in the roads, memorials, and public buildings across Belgaum, Bangalore, Mangalore, and Chitradurga that bear their names — a fitting reminder that the fight for India's freedom was waged as much in the bar libraries and district courts of Karnataka as on its streets.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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