

Royal Patronage, Public Welfare and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Colonial Bangalore: The Mysore Maharaja and the Bangalore Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1912–1930

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Abstract

The history of animal welfare in colonial India has often been studied through legislation, religious reform, veterinary institutions, and the activities of urban voluntary organisations. This article examines a more specific and less studied dimension: the relationship between the Mysore court and the Bangalore Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) during the early twentieth century. Based primarily on a 93-page archival compilation containing correspondence, annual reports, rules, financial statements, and administrative notes relating to donations and animal-welfare activities, the study traces the development of the Society and the changing form of Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV's support. The records show that royal patronage operated through several channels: annual donations, contributions to animal shows and prize funds, symbolic patronage, and administrative correspondence through the Palace and Private Secretary's offices. The Society itself developed a practical programme that included education, inspection, warning and prosecution of offenders, assistance to veterinary hospitals and pinjrapoles, and public appeals for information. Its annual reports also reveal the limits of voluntary welfare: insufficient funds, limited inspectors, weak public participation, jurisdictional restrictions, and dependence on fines and public subscriptions. The article argues that royal patronage was not merely charitable giving. It formed part of a wider network of public service, civic association, colonial administration, and princely legitimacy in which animal welfare became a visible field of moral governance. At the same time, the records demonstrate that compassion coexisted with a utilitarian understanding of animals as labouring and domestic beings. The study therefore contributes to the social and environmental history of princely Mysore and to the history of animal welfare in colonial South India.

Keywords: animal welfare, Bangalore SPCA, Mysore State, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, royal patronage, colonial India, veterinary care, public charity

Introduction

The history of colonial India is usually written through political institutions, economic change, social reform, education, law, and nationalist activity. Animals, although central to agriculture, transport, policing, trade, military activity, urban life, and royal culture, have received comparatively less attention

in regional histories. Recent scholarship has shown that animals were not simply passive subjects of human history. They were part of colonial systems of labour, science, conservation, hunting, and governance (Chakrabarti 2010; Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan 2014). The history of animal welfare therefore provides an important way of understanding changing ideas of public responsibility, morality, administration, and the relationship between humans and animals.

In colonial India, organised animal-protection activity developed alongside the growth of urban voluntary associations and anti-cruelty legislation. The first Indian societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals emerged in the nineteenth century, and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1890 provided a wider legal framework. Yet legislation alone did not prevent cruelty. Local societies depended on inspectors, police cooperation, courts, veterinary services, donations, subscriptions, and public participation. The Bangalore Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals provides a valuable case through which these connections can be examined.

The archival material used in this study is particularly valuable because it brings together correspondence between the Society and the Palace of Mysore. The documents show that the Maharaja of Mysore was not simply listed as a ceremonial patron. His support was repeatedly requested, authorised, remitted, acknowledged, and recorded. In 1916, when a new Bangalore Society was being organised, Major E. G. Hart approached the Palace requesting that His Highness become patron and support the proposed Society financially. The Private Secretary replied that the Maharaja would be pleased to become patron and would also help financially. Hart suggested an initial contribution of Rs. 100, which was subsequently remitted through the Palace Controller (Archival File, pp. 43–46).

This episode provides the central point of departure for the article. It raises questions about why animal welfare became a field of royal patronage, how such support was organised, what the Society actually did with its resources, and what the records reveal about the relationship between voluntary welfare and colonial administration.

Historical and Legal Context

The growth of animal-welfare organisations in India must be understood within the wider colonial history of animal protection. Scholars have shown that the first formal anti-cruelty initiatives emerged in the nineteenth century, partly in response to concern about the treatment of draught and domestic animals. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals legislation of 1869 in Bengal and the all-India framework of 1890 formed important stages in the legal history of animal welfare (Chakrabarti 2010; Krishna 2020). These measures were, however, limited and were shaped by colonial ideas about appropriate treatment, public order, and the regulation of working animals.

The colonial animal-welfare movement also contained contradictions. Chakrabarti argues that colonial India combined compassion towards certain animals with extensive use of animals in transport, military logistics, hunting, and scientific research. Animals could therefore be treated simultaneously as objects of care and as resources. This contradiction is important for understanding the Bangalore SPCA. Its rules and annual reports expressed concern for sick, injured, overloaded, underfed, and ill-treated animals, but the Society's activities were concentrated especially on labouring and domestic animals whose health was closely connected with urban transport and work.

The Society's formal rules stated that its object was to prevent cruel treatment and secure the welfare of animals in Bangalore. The means included educating children and the public, warning or prosecuting offenders, assisting veterinary hospitals and pinjrapoles, and inviting information from persons interested

in animal welfare. Membership was also structured financially: ordinary members subscribed annually, life members contributed Rs. 200 or more in one sum, and large donors could be recognised as benefactors (Archival File, pp. 59–60). These rules show that animal welfare was conceived as a combination of moral education, legal enforcement, institutional care, and voluntary finance.

The Bangalore Society and its Institutional Revival

The archival report explains that the Society existing in 1916 was a revival of an earlier Bangalore organisation that had worked for about twenty-four years before closing because of inadequate public support. Major E. G. Hart took the initiative to revive it and organised a public meeting at Mayo Hall on 1 April 1916. The new committee included European and Indian members, indicating that the Society operated within a mixed civic environment rather than as a purely official colonial body (Archival File, pp. 63–64).

The Palace became involved at an early stage. On 12 March 1916 Hart wrote to the Private Secretary to the Maharaja requesting that His Highness become patron. The response of 16 March stated that the Maharaja would be pleased to become patron and would also be willing to assist financially. Hart suggested Rs. 100 as an appropriate initial contribution. On 26 March the Palace Controller forwarded a cheque for Rs. 100 to the proposed Society (Archival File, pp. 43–46).

The Society was formally incorporated on 24 May 1916 under the Societies Act as applied to the Civil and Military Station of Bangalore (Archival File, p. 58). Its rules invited the Maharaja of Mysore and the British Resident in Mysore to serve as patrons. This arrangement is significant. The Society brought together voluntary association, colonial administration, urban civic life, and princely authority. The Maharaja's patronage therefore formed part of the institutional structure of the Society, while the Society itself remained dependent on members, subscribers, inspectors, police, magistrates, and public cooperation.

From Moral Appeal to Legal Enforcement

One of the most important features of the Society was the combination of moral persuasion and legal action. The rules called for education, warning, threatening, and prosecution. The annual report for the early period after the revival indicates that the Society's officers initially had to report offences through the municipal Health Department. This arrangement was considered unsatisfactory. From January 1917, the Society received greater independence, and its officers and inspectors were given powers to arrest and prosecute offenders under the relevant law. During the year under review, 1,053 cases of cruelty were taken up, 860 had been heard by the magistrate, and fines amounting to Rs. 1,548-8-0 had been imposed (Archival File, pp. 63–64).

The figures reveal the scale of the problem as perceived by the Society. They also demonstrate the importance of institutional authority. Animal welfare was not limited to private kindness; it was increasingly connected with inspection, evidence, police powers, courts, and fines. At the same time, the Society complained that it did not automatically receive a share of fines imposed by magistrates. The committee hoped that a municipal resolution would provide financial support, including a proposed annual grant of Rs. 1,000, but the material does not establish clearly whether the entire proposed arrangement was implemented.

The Society's financial dependence shaped its practical capacity. The early report noted that only two inspectors could be employed because of limited funds. The committee believed that many offences

remained undetected because two inspectors could not cover all parts of Bangalore. This limitation is important because it shows the difference between formal legal power and actual enforcement capacity.

Veterinary Care and the Idea of Humane Treatment

The Society's concern extended beyond punishment. A major problem identified in the archival report was the absence of an adequate veterinary hospital to which diseased and injured animals could be sent for treatment. The Society feared that animals returned to their owners might immediately be forced back into work. It therefore considered veterinary treatment an essential part of prevention rather than merely a medical service (Archival File, p. 64).

The rules similarly proposed assisting veterinary hospitals and pinjrapoles in providing free treatment to sick and lame animals belonging to indigent owners. This is significant because it reveals a practical welfare philosophy. The Society did not simply condemn cruelty; it recognised that poverty and dependence on animals for labour could contribute to neglect. By linking animal welfare with veterinary care, the Society addressed the material conditions under which working animals lived.

The 1918 report further demonstrates the scale of intervention. A total of 1,033 cases of cruelty were detected and dealt with during the year. Of these, 129 concerned horses, 53 ponies, 14 mules, and 664 bullocks in cases heard by the magistrate. The distribution suggests that working animals were at the centre of the Society's activities (Archival File, p. 66).

The Society also produced educational material directed towards stablemen and drivers. Its publications advised owners about feeding, watering, rest, cleanliness, harness, stable conditions, and the treatment of tired or sick horses. Such material shows that the Society attempted to change everyday practices rather than rely only on legal punishment. The language of the material combined moral appeal with practical instruction, presenting kindness as both an ethical duty and a condition for keeping animals healthy and productive (Archival File, pp. 67–68).

Royal Patronage as Continuing Support

The relationship between the Mysore Maharaja and the Bangalore SPCA did not end with the initial contribution of 1916. The archival file contains repeated correspondence showing continuing financial support. A 1912 Palace record, predating the formal incorporation of the 1916 Society, records a donation of Rs. 50 from the Maharaja towards the Society for the current year (Archival File, pp. 82–83). The earlier record is useful because it demonstrates that Mysore royal support for animal-protection activity in Bangalore existed before the Society's formal incorporation in 1916.

After 1916, the form of patronage became more regular. In 1920 the Maharaja sanctioned Rs. 100 towards the prizes for a Horse and Dog Show held under his patronage. A separate communication in July 1920 records a Rs. 50 contribution for the cattle section of an Animal Show organised under the Society's auspices (Archival File, pp. 72–75). In 1921, a further Rs. 100 was sent as the Maharaja's donation to the Society, while the records also show contributions connected with animal-show activities (Archival File, pp. 76–79).

In 1923 the Palace sent Rs. 100 towards the Horse Show planned for July, and the Society formally acknowledged the amount (Archival File, pp. 87–89). In 1925 and 1926, the Maharaja's annual contribution is recorded as Rs. 100. The 1927 annual contribution was also Rs. 100, although correspondence shows that payment was delayed and the Society had to remind the Palace. The Society's

records for 1927 state that the Maharaja had traditionally contributed Rs. 100 annually, while noting that the 1927 amount had not initially been remitted (Archival File, pp. 6–11).

The documentary pattern is therefore more revealing than any single payment. Royal support was regular but not automatic in practice. The Society sometimes had to remind the Palace and explain its financial needs. This suggests that patronage was a negotiated relationship rather than an unlimited royal subsidy.

Animal Shows, Education and Public Culture

Animal shows formed an important part of the Society's welfare strategy. They were not merely entertainment. The programmes included prizes for well-cared-for cows, buffaloes, bullocks, calves, dogs, donkeys, ponies, hackney carriage horses, and properly shod horses and bullocks. Such competitions rewarded visible standards of care and attempted to encourage owners to treat working animals better.

The 1927 Animal Show accounts indicate contributions from the Yuvaraja of Mysore and several other donors. The show generated a profit of Rs. 169-6-6 according to the Society's annual report. The event therefore combined public education, competition, fundraising, and moral demonstration (Archival File, pp. 18–22).

This approach is important in understanding the Society's wider public culture. Instead of presenting animal welfare solely as a matter of prosecution, it created occasions through which good treatment could be publicly displayed and rewarded. The participation of the Mysore royal family in such events strengthened the symbolic dimension of the Society's work. Royal patronage could thus operate not only through money but also through public recognition and prestige.

The Financial Structure of Welfare

The annual report for 1927 provides a detailed picture of the Society's financial position. Subscriptions and donations amounted to Rs. 1,628-12-0, while the share of fines credited to the Society was Rs. 582-14-0. Interest and profit from investments contributed additional income, and the Animal Show produced Rs. 169-6-6. Total expenditure was slightly higher than income, resulting in an excess expenditure of Rs. 112-7-4 (Archival File, pp. 17–18).

The financial statement shows that royal donations, although important, formed only one part of a broader support system. The Society relied on many individuals, firms, subscriptions, collections, fines, investments, and special events. The donor list includes Europeans, Indians, commercial firms, schools, and other civic supporters. The breadth of the list suggests that animal welfare had become part of Bangalore's associational culture.

At the same time, the financial deficit reveals the fragility of voluntary welfare. The Society noted that it had previously benefited from proceeds of the annual Horse Show and hoped that the 1928 show would again provide support. It also increased the pay of inspectors because the committee considered their work important. Thus, the expansion of welfare activity created additional financial pressure.

Police, Courts and Civic Cooperation

The Society's annual report repeatedly acknowledged the cooperation of the police, especially the Hackney Carriage Department. This relationship was essential because many cases concerned horses and other animals used in urban transport. The Society's work depended on a chain linking inspectors, police officers, magistrates, veterinary officials, and voluntary donors.

The 1927 report recorded 327 prosecutions, of which 315 resulted in convictions. The Society also recorded 178 animals sent to the Veterinary Hospital for inspection or treatment. These figures indicate that animal welfare involved both enforcement and care. The high conviction figure suggests that the Society was able to convert many complaints into successful prosecutions, although the report also regretted the limited number of cases reported by the public (Archival File, pp. 12–14).

The Society's officers repeatedly appealed to the public to report cruelty. Public reluctance to appear in court as witnesses was identified as a major obstacle. The Society therefore depended on a form of civic participation in which ordinary residents had to observe, report, and sometimes testify. This demonstrates that animal welfare was also a form of public citizenship.

Limits of the Welfare Project

The archival records reveal several important limits. First, the Society suffered from inadequate financial support. The early committee struggled to maintain enough inspectors and sought regular subscriptions. The 1927 report again recorded a deficit and dependence on income from special events.

Second, the Society faced jurisdictional restrictions. The 1927 report noted that no SPCA branch operated in the City outside the Civil and Military Station area. Consequently, the Society's activities were confined to its jurisdiction, and animals could be moved beyond its authority. This reduced the effectiveness of enforcement.

Third, public apathy remained a problem. The Society stated that reports of cruelty were comparatively rare and that members of the public were often reluctant to appear in court. Thus, formal institutions could not alone produce effective welfare.

Fourth, the Society's understanding of animal welfare remained closely connected to utility. Much of its work concerned horses, bullocks, ponies, cattle, and other animals used for labour and transport. Its educational material emphasised that properly fed and rested horses would work better and last longer. This was compassionate, but it also reflected a practical economic logic. Animal welfare was therefore located between moral concern and the preservation of useful labour.

Mysore, Princely Legitimacy and Public Charity

The role of the Mysore Maharaja in supporting the Bangalore SPCA can be situated within the broader history of public charity and princely legitimacy. Janaki Nair has shown that princely Mysore developed complex relationships between kingship, public institutions, charity, law, and colonial administration. Public giving could carry moral and political meanings beyond simple generosity (Nair 2011; Nair 2021). The SPCA records fit within this wider pattern. The Maharaja's name appeared as patron, his Private Secretary handled correspondence, and the Palace Controller transmitted payments. The Society's requests were framed respectfully, while its acknowledgements expressed gratitude. This bureaucratic language transformed royal generosity into a documented public relationship.

At the same time, the relationship was not entirely controlled by the Palace. The Society initiated requests, proposed amounts, reminded officials about delayed payments, organised events, maintained accounts, and reported its activities. The relationship can therefore be understood as reciprocal. The Society gained financial and symbolic support, while the Maharaja's patronage enhanced the public visibility of his role as a benefactor of civic causes.

This is especially significant in the context of princely Mysore under British paramountcy. Recent scholarship has shown that the Wodeyars used animal-related practices, including elephant preservation

and hunting, in the construction and negotiation of kingship (Abraham 2024; Abraham 2025). The SPCA records add another dimension to this history: animals could also become objects of charitable protection and civic responsibility. The same royal order that used animals in ceremonial and hunting cultures could participate in a modern voluntary movement devoted to preventing cruelty.

Conclusion

The history of the Bangalore Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals demonstrates that animal welfare in colonial South India was shaped by a combination of law, voluntary action, veterinary practice, public morality, policing, and royal patronage. The Society's revival in 1916 created an institutional framework in which animal protection became a regular civic activity. Its rules combined education, inspection, prosecution, veterinary assistance, and public participation. Its annual reports reveal both significant activity and persistent limitations.

The Mysore Maharaja's role was important but should not be reduced to a simple story of benevolent donation. The archival correspondence shows a continuing relationship extending across several decades. Royal support included the initial Rs. 100 contribution in 1916, annual donations in later years, and special contributions to animal shows and prize funds. The records also show that the Society sometimes had to request or remind the Palace about payments. Patronage was therefore continuing but negotiated.

The Society's work also reveals the practical character of early animal welfare. The focus on horses, bullocks, ponies, cattle, and other working animals reflected the economic importance of animal labour in urban and colonial society. The Society sought to reduce overloading, underfeeding, beating, poor harnessing, and neglect, while also promoting veterinary treatment and humane care. Its educational literature attempted to persuade stablemen and owners that kindness and proper care were both moral duties and practical necessities.

Most importantly, the archival record places animal welfare within the history of public life in princely Mysore and colonial Bangalore. Royal patronage, municipal administration, police cooperation, voluntary associations, veterinary institutions, courts, newspapers, donors, and ordinary citizens all participated in the welfare project. The Bangalore SPCA was consequently more than a charitable association. It was a site where ideas of compassion, civic responsibility, public order, and princely legitimacy met.

The study also points to the value of local archival records for writing environmental and social history. Palace correspondence and Society reports reveal everyday aspects of animal welfare that are not easily visible in general legal histories. They show how broad principles were translated into payments, prosecutions, inspections, hospital referrals, public meetings, and animal shows. The Bangalore case therefore contributes to a wider understanding of how modern animal-welfare practices developed in colonial India and how princely patronage helped sustain them.

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