# Srirangapatna: Capability Without Coalition

India

CROSSROADS

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# Srirangapatna: Capability Without Coalition

*Tipu Sultan died defending his walls on 4 May 1799 — killed by a coalition he could never match despite out-innovating the British in rockets, trade, and silk. His iron-cased rockets became the "rockets' red glare" of the U.S. anthem. His Chinese silkworms became a ₹332-crore industry. The lesson is structural: capability without coalition does not survive.*

## QUICK FACTS

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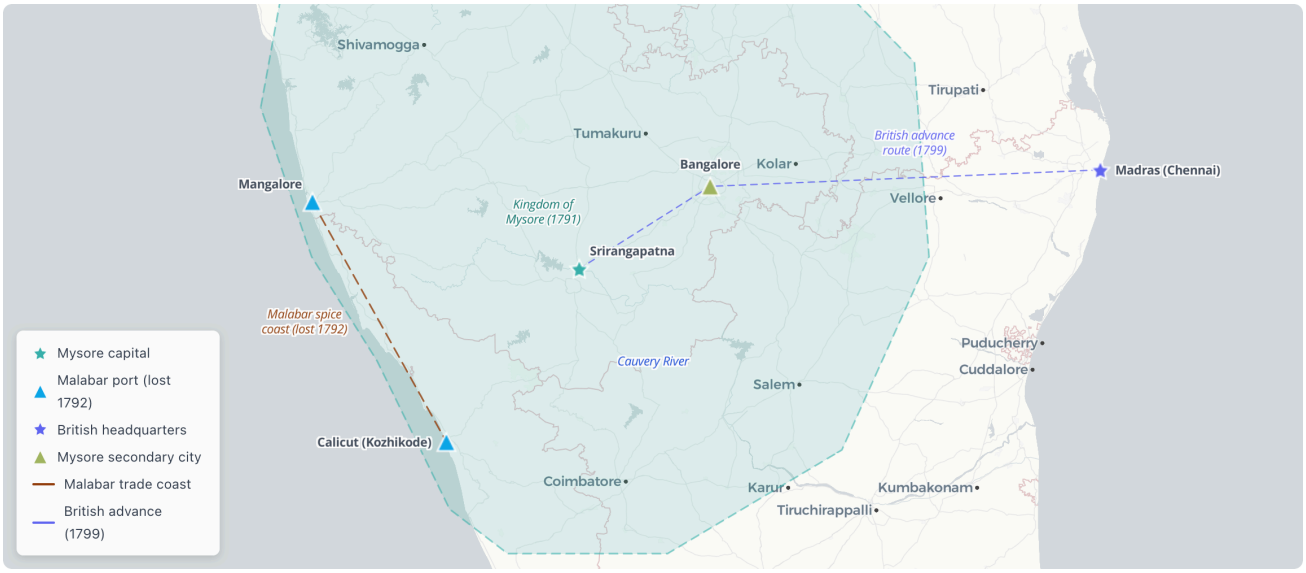
|---|---|
| **Market Size** | Karnataka = 32% of India's raw silk output • KSIC gross sales ₹332.15 crore (2024–25) • Ramanagara: 40,000–50,000 kg cocoons daily — Tipu's 1786 sericulture project still producing |
| **Unique Advantage** | Iron-cased rockets → "rockets' red glare" (Fort McHenry, 1814) • 1786 sericulture project → ₹332-crore KSIC industry — both innovations outlasted the kingdom that built them |
| **Biggest Challenge** | Coalition arithmetic: Company + Nizam + Marathas vs Mysore alone — four wars in 32 years proved that alliance signalling cannot substitute for alliance capability |
| **Timing Factor** | UNESCO World Heritage tentative listing since 2014 with no formal dossier submitted; 2025 port mega-project threatens 18th-century Cauvery riverfront fabric |

**MARKETS:** India

# Geographic Context: Srirangapatna and Mysore's Commercial Reach






Mysore's commercial empire stretched from Malabar ports to Muscat — the 1792 cession of the coast ended it.

The map holds five points and two routes. Srirangapatna sat on a Cauvery river island in interior Karnataka — defensible, but landlocked. Its commercial life ran west across the Western Ghats to two Malabar ports: Calicut, the chief pepper terminal, and Mangalore, the arms-import harbour. Eastward across the peninsula sat Madras, the East India Company headquarters and the launching point for three of the four Anglo-Mysore wars. Between Srirangapatna and Madras lay Bangalore, the kingdom's second city and inland factory hub. The 1792 Treaty of Seringapatam cut the western half of this map away: Malabar's ports passed to the Company, severing the pepper-and-sandalwood revenue base seven years before the final siege.

* * *

*On 13 September 1814, Francis Scott Key watched the bombardment of Fort McHenry from the deck of a British sloop in Baltimore Harbour. The rockets he described in his poem — "the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air" — were Congreve rockets, named after the British artillery officer William Congreve who had refined and industrialised them. What the poem does not say, because Key had no way of knowing it, was that those rockets were Mysorean in design. They had been reverse-engineered from specimens captured at the fall of Srirangapatna fifteen years earlier, on 4 May 1799, when a British assault force crossed a four-foot-deep ford of the Cauvery River and breached a wall that had held three previous armies. The man who had invented them, Tipu Sultan, died near the Water Gate that afternoon. The rockets outlasted him by a generation.*

# The island that built rockets

Srirangapatna is a river island two kilometres long and less than one kilometre wide, sitting in a bend of the Cauvery where it drops off the Deccan plateau toward the sea. It entered recorded history in 894 CE, when a Western Ganga vassal named Tirumalaiah consecrated the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple there — an act of devotion that would make the island a Vaishnava pilgrimage site for a thousand years across every subsequent regime change. The Wodeyar kings made it their capital in 1610; Kanthirava Narasaraja Wodeyar rebuilt the fort in stone in 1654. What made the island strategically decisive was not its holiness but its geography: it commanded the Cauvery crossings that connected the Mysore plateau to the Malabar Coast in the west and the Coromandel plains in the east.

Hyder Ali, a soldier of fortune who had risen through the Wodeyar army, displaced the dynasty in 1761 and transformed Mysore into something new: a French-trained military-fiscal state with an explicit commercial strategy. He seized Malabar from 1766 onward, capturing the spice ports that the East India Company depended on. By 1779 Mysore controlled roughly 80,000 square miles. When Hyder died of cancer in December 1782, his son Tipu Sultan, then thirty-one, took the throne and spent the next seventeen years building what was, by most available evidence, the most systematically innovative state in late-18th-century Asia.

The innovations came on multiple vectors simultaneously. The rocket corps, codified in the *Fathul Mujahidin* tactical manual, eventually reached a strength of approximately 5,000 rocket men. What distinguished Mysorean rockets from European equivalents was the casing: iron tubes rather than bamboo, which allowed gunpowder to be packed to greater densities and produced sustained pressures that drove ranges to 1,000 yards or more — superior to anything then fielded in Europe. The rockets were attached to bamboo poles for stabilisation and launched from iron frames; Narasimha's 1985 technical study at the National Aerospace Laboratories confirmed that Indian iron quality at the period exceeded British counterparts, making the performance advantage a materials science problem as much as a military one.

The commercial state was equally ambitious. Tipu established a public-shareholding trading company with 30 inland factories — at Bangalore, Channapatna, Bidnur, Srirangapatna itself — and 17 abroad: Muscat (the largest), Jeddah, Hormuz, Pegu, and more. From 1785 he placed pepper, sandalwood, cardamom, betel nut, coconut, teak, sugar, salt, iron and elephants under crown monopoly. At Muscat, Mysorean merchants paid 4% import duty; most Indian merchants paid 8%; European traders paid 5%. This was deliberate industrial policy — a competitive subsidy to the home producer, enforced by sovereign authority.

Then in April 1786 he wrote a letter to his factor at Muscat instructing him to locate Chinese silkworm eggs and rearers. The resulting sericulture project seeded 18 to 21 centres across Mysore. The project's output — what mulberry breeders came to call the "Pure Mysore Race" silkworm — would outlast the kingdom that commissioned it.

## The alliance that never arrived

None of this was built in diplomatic isolation. Tipu Sultan understood, perhaps better than anyone in 18th-century India, that he was facing a competitor with structural advantages he could not match alone. The East India Company had the Bengal revenue base — the richest province in Asia — to fund endless replacement armies. Mysore's population and territory were a fraction of that.

His response was a sustained programme of alliance-building that reached from Versailles to Constantinople to Kabul. In 1787 he dispatched an embassy to Paris carrying gifts of cotton muslin robes, pearl and diamond jewellery, and a wish-list of Sèvres porcelain, scientific instruments, and craftsmen — several of whom returned and helped build "Tipu's Tiger" automaton, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The embassy arrived as France began its slide into revolution. No alliance materialised.

He wrote to the Ottoman Sultan in 1785 and 1787, proposing joint action against the British. The Ottomans were engaged in a war with Russia and Austro-Hungary. No alliance materialised. He courted Zaman Shah of Kabul. The Persians invaded Afghanistan. No alliance materialised.

In 1797, with the Fourth War already looming, Tipu sent an embassy to Mauritius — then the Île-de-France, a French colony — seeking to reactivate the French connection. General Malartic, the island's governor, issued a public proclamation on 30 January 1798 calling for volunteers to serve under Tipu Sultan. The British intercepted it. Napoleon's letter to Tipu, dated January 1799 and promising "an innumerable and invincible army, full of the desire of releasing and relieving you from the iron yoke of England," was intercepted at Muscat. Napoleon was in Egypt. None of it reached Srirangapatna in time to matter.

What the record shows is not strategic incompetence but structural impossibility. Each individual diplomatic initiative was reasonable given what Tipu knew at the time. Collectively they reveal the pattern: alliance signalling cannot substitute for alliance capability. France was distracted by revolution and Egypt; the Ottomans by Russia; the Afghans by Persia; the Marathas by their own succession crisis. The Company, by contrast, had the patience and the treasury to fight four wars across thirty-two years and to rebuild its Indian coalition each time.

## Three shocks in thirty-two years

The four Anglo-Mysore Wars have the logic of a progressive tightening: each one reveals a different failure mode, and each one leaves Mysore smaller.

The First War (1767–69) ended with Hyder at the gates of Madras and the British signing a mutual-defence clause they promptly ignored when the Marathas attacked Mysore in 1771. The lesson Hyder drew was correct: the Company was the existential adversary, and treaties with it were instruments to be used rather than honoured.

The Second War (1780–84) opened with Hyder's catastrophic defeat of William Baillie at Pollilur in September 1780 — one of the worst British losses in 18th-century India — and ended with the Treaty of Mangalore in March 1784 restoring the *status quo ante bellum*. Warren Hastings considered the terms unfavourable to Britain. Tipu had inherited the war mid-conflict when Hyder died in December 1782 and continued it without French support after the Treaty of Versailles ended that war in 1783. He fought to a draw alone. That was the high point.

The Third War (1790–92) was the one that mattered. Tipu invaded Travancore in December 1789 — triggering a treaty obligation — and Cornwallis arrived in India with a deliberate strategy: build the triple alliance of Company, Nizam, and Marathas that would make Mysore's defeat mathematically certain regardless of battlefield performance. The strategy worked. Bangalore fell to Cornwallis in March 1791. The siege of Srirangapatna followed in February 1792. Tipu accepted the Treaty of Seringapatam on 18 March 1792.

The terms were designed to incapacitate rather than destroy. Mysore ceded approximately half its territory — the Malabar Coast, Coorg, Baramahal, and Dindigul to the Company; districts on the Krishna river to the Marathas; territories between Krishna and Pennar to the Nizam. The indemnity was 330 lakh rupees: approximately £3.3 million in 1792 sterling, approximately £637 million by 2026 price indices. Tipu's two sons, aged seven and eleven, were surrendered as hostages on 26 February 1792 and held in Madras until partial indemnity payment secured their return in 1794.

The commercial damage was more fundamental than the territory. Malabar — the western ports, the pepper and cardamom monopoly, the sandalwood access — was the revenue spine of Tipu's state. Without it, Mysore was attempting to operate the same commercial-military model on half the asset base while servicing an indemnity that had already consumed much of its reserves.

## One p.m., 4 May 1799

Tipu rebuilt for seven years. He founded a Jacobin Club, planted a Liberty Tree, styled himself "Citizen Tipoo" in his correspondence with the French, and dispatched three further sets of embassies. None arrived at their destinations with operational allies in tow.

Lord Wellesley, the new Governor-General, chose to interpret the Malartic Proclamation as *casus belli* and demanded that Tipu accept the Subsidiary Alliance system — in effect, sovereignty in name only. Tipu declined. Three armies, totalling over 50,000 combined strength against Tipu's approximately 30,000, converged on Srirangapatna in February 1799. The coalition arithmetic had now inverted completely: the Company had three Indian allies; Tipu had none in theatre.

Tipu lost at Sedaseer on 6 March and at Mallavelly on 27 March. The siege of Srirangapatna began on 5 April. The Cauvery was at its annual low — fordable at the western curtain. Hyderabadi batteries opened a practical breach in the western wall on 2 May.

At 1 p.m. on 4 May 1799, David Baird led a forlorn hope of 76 troops, followed by 4,376 infantry — 2,494 European, 1,882 Indian sepoys — across the river and up the breach. They carried it in sixteen minutes. The timing was not coincidental: Tipu's astrologers had warned that 4 May was inauspicious, and his troops were at their midday meal. He rode to the breach, was unhorsed by wounds, was shot, and died near the Water Gate by mid-afternoon. His body was recovered that evening.

Arthur Wellesley — the future Duke of Wellington — was installed as military governor on 5 May 1799. When he later described Srirangapatna as the formative experience of his generalship, he was not exaggerating: the administration of a conquered territory under an absent political authority was precisely the problem he would face repeatedly across the next forty years.

## Woolwich, 1804

Among the materiel recovered from the fallen fort were some 600 rocket launchers, 700 serviceable rockets, and approximately 9,000 empty rocket bodies. They were shipped to the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich Arsenal, where William Congreve's father was serving as Comptroller. The younger Congreve examined them, recognised what the iron casing had achieved in terms of chamber pressure and range, and spent the next several years reverse-engineering the propulsion technology into a form manufacturable at industrial scale.

The Congreve rocket was first tested in 1804 and first used in combat on 8 October 1806 at Boulogne — setting fire to much of the town. It was used at the Battle of Leipzig in October 1813, and at Fort McHenry in September 1814, where British forces bombarded an American-held fort from ships in Baltimore Harbour for twenty-five hours. Francis Scott Key, a lawyer who had boarded a British vessel to negotiate a prisoner exchange, watched the overnight bombardment and the flag still flying at dawn, and wrote eight stanzas that contained the phrase "the rockets' red glare."

The rockets were Mysorean in their core technology, British in their manufacture, and American in their mythological afterlife. The two rockets recovered from Srirangapatna that are now in the Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich, and the two others in the Science Museum in London, are the material link in a chain that runs from an iron foundry on a Cauvery island to the opening line of a national anthem.

## The silkworm that survived

The rockets required the fort to function. When the fort fell, the rockets fell with it. The silkworms were different.

Tipu's 1786 sericulture project had distributed itself across 18 to 21 centres across Mysore — Channapatna, Mogenahalli, Srirangapatna, and others. The distribution was a function of the biology: silkworms require fresh

mulberry leaves, proximity to the trees, and workers with local knowledge. You cannot concentrate them behind a single wall. By the time the British breached that wall in 1799, the sericulture knowledge and much of the worm stock had already propagated across the countryside.

The project nearly died anyway. By 1801 the wartime disruption had collapsed most of the centres. But the biological infrastructure remained — the mulberry trees, the rearing knowledge, the existence of a market for raw silk. In 1866 an Italian filature opened at Kengeri with Wodeyar support; in 1902 J.N. Tata established a Bangalore silk farm with imported Japanese expertise; in 1912 Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV opened the Mysore Silk Weaving Factory with 32 Swiss looms. Karnataka Silk Industries Corporation was established in 1980.

On 28 November 2005, Mysore Silk received Geographical Indication status — Application No. 11, Certificate No. 14 — mandating 65% silver and 0.65% gold zari and weaving within Mysore City Corporation limits. The GI tag is a commercial instrument, but it is also a chain of title linking the modern fabric to the Cauvery island where Tipu's Muscat factor was instructed to source Chinese mulberry expertise in April 1786.

In 2024–25, Karnataka Silk Industries Corporation recorded gross Mysore-Silk-saree sales of ₹332.15 crore and after-tax profit of ₹101.15 crore. Karnataka produces 12,463 metric tonnes of raw silk annually — 32% of India's national output, 42% of mulberry silk production. Ramanagara, 50 kilometres from Srirangapatna, sells 40,000 to 50,000 kilograms of cocoons daily. Ramanagara is described by the state government as the largest cocoon market in Asia. The thread from Tipu's 24 April 1786 letter to that daily market is, at 239 years, one of the longest commercial continuity stories in Indian industrial history.

## What capability without coalition means

Srirangapatna poses a founder question that does not resolve easily. Tipu Sultan built a more capable state than his adversary on the dimensions that are conventionally supposed to determine commercial outcomes — product (rockets), distribution (17 overseas factories), pricing discipline (differential tariffs), technology transfer (Chinese, French, Bengali expertise), and capital structure (public-shareholding trading company). He lost catastrophically and in a way that was, in retrospect, structurally determined.

Three observations emerge from the record.

First: if your innovation forces an incumbent into existential framing, expect them to build a coalition, and budget for it from year one. The Company's willingness to fight four wars over thirty-two years — absorbing two humiliating defeats in the first — was not extraordinary determination. It was the rational strategy of an incumbent that understood its structural advantages and was prepared to mobilise them across time horizons that a single founder-state could not match. Tipu's innovations made Mysore dangerous enough to attract that coalition response. They did not make it dangerous enough to survive it.

Second: capability locked inside a single location is half-built capability. The rockets required the fort and died with it; the silkworms had propagated across 18 to 21 centres and could survive the fort's fall. The innovation that survived Srirangapatna was the one that had been geographically distributed before the crisis hit. Distributing assets and intellectual property across locations and legal structures is not a hedge against improbable events — it is the structural difference between capability that outlasts a disruption and capability that dies with the entity that built it.

Third: Tipu's final error was accepting battle on the incumbent's terms — defending a fixed island fortress against a coalition assault that his own resources could not match. The coalitional arithmetic had inverted irreversibly by 1799; the correct analysis was available to him by 1797 at the latest. Fighting from a fixed defensive position against that coalition was the only option he retained, which is precisely what the Treaty of Seringapatam had been designed to produce. The lesson is not that Tipu should have surrendered; it is that the 1792 treaty was the battle that mattered, and the breach of the western curtain in 1799 was downstream of decisions taken seven years earlier.

Srirangapatna today is a town of roughly 25,000 residents in Mandya district, sixteen kilometres north of Mysuru on the national highway. The Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple still draws Vaishnava pilgrims. The Daria Daulat Bagh — the teakwood summer palace built in 1784, its walls frescoed with the Mysorean victory at Pollilur — is an ASI museum. The Gumbaz mausoleum holds Tipu, Hyder Ali, and Fatima Begum. The Monuments of Srirangapatna Island Town have been on UNESCO's World Heritage tentative list since 2014. A formal dossier has not been submitted.

The rockets are in London. The silk is still producing.

**KEY TAKEAWAY**

**Innovation strong enough to threaten an incumbent earns a coalition response — and capability locked inside a single location dies with that location when the coalition arrives.**

* * *

# Trade timeline

Eleven centuries from a 9th-century Vaishnava pilgrimage island to a ₹332-crore silk industry in 2025 — but the arc that matters is the 38 years from Hyder Ali's 1761 seizure of the Wodeyar throne to the 1799 breach in Srirangapatna's western wall. In that span Mysore became 18th-century India's most innovative state in rockets, sericulture, and overseas trade; the kingdom did not survive the coalition that finally arrived, but the inventions did — Mysorean rockets entered the U.S. national anthem in 1814, and Tipu's 1786 silkworm project still produces a third of India's raw silk.

Setup · Catalyst · Struggle · Crisis · Breakthrough · Triumph

SETUP

### Ranganathaswamy Temple consecrated

Western Ganga vassal Tirumalaiah consecrates the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple on the Cauvery island, establishing Srirangapatna as a Vaishnava pilgrimage site 900 years before it becomes Tipu's capital.

SETUP

### Wodeyars make it their capital

Raja Wodeyar I captures the island from the Vijayanagara successor state and establishes Srirangapatna as the Mysore kingdom's capital. Kanthirava Narasaraja Wodeyar rebuilds the fort in stone in 1654.

CATALYST

### Hyder Ali seizes power

Hyder Ali, a soldier of fortune in the Wodeyar army, displaces the dynasty and transforms Mysore into a French-trained military-fiscal state. He occupies Malabar from 1766, capturing the spice ports the East India Company depended on.

CATALYST

### Treaty of Madras — and the clause the British ignored

The First Anglo-Mysore War ends with Hyder at the gates of Madras. The treaty includes a mutual-defence clause the British will ignore when Marathas attack Mysore in 1771 — confirming that the Company is Mysore's existential adversary.

STRUGGLE

### Tipu builds the innovation state

After taking the throne on Hyder's death in 1782, Tipu Sultan codifies the Fathul Mujahidin rocket warfare manual, establishes a state trading company with public shareholding and 17 overseas factories, and strikes new coinage. South Indian textile workers' real wages broadly match those of unskilled labour in southern England.

STRUGGLE

### The 24 April letter: Chinese silkworms ordered

Tipu writes to his Muscat factor instructing him to source Chinese silkworm eggs and rearers. The resulting project establishes 18–21 sericulture centres across Mysore — the unbroken thread that reaches KSIC's ₹332-crore annual sales in 2024–25.

CRISIS

### Treaty of Seringapatam — the commercial state decapitated

Cornwallis's triple alliance forces Mysore to cede ~half its territory: Malabar Coast, Coorg, Baramahal, and Dindigul to the Company. Indemnity: 330 lakh rupees (~£637 million in 2026 CPI). Tipu's sons, aged 7 and 11, surrendered as hostages. The cession strips Mysore of its ports and the pepper-and-sandalwood revenue base.

CRISIS

### 4 May: the breach in the western wall

At 1 p.m. on 4 May, David Baird's 4,376 storming troops cross a four-foot-deep Cauvery ford and carry the breach in 16 minutes — chosen because Tipu's astrologers had warned the day was inauspicious. Tipu is killed near the Water Gate by mid-afternoon. Arthur Wellesley is installed governor the next day.

BREAKTHROUGH

### Congreve rockets first used in combat

Rockets reverse-engineered from Mysorean specimens at the Woolwich Arsenal — where William Congreve's father was Comptroller — are first used in combat at Boulogne on 8 October 1806, burning much of the town. Iron casing technology transfers intact; the intellectual trajectory from Srirangapatna is unbroken.

BREAKTHROUGH

### "The rockets' red glare" — Fort McHenry

British forces bombard Fort McHenry, Baltimore, 13–14 September 1814. Francis Scott Key, watching from a ship, writes “the rockets' red glare” into what will become the U.S. national anthem. The rockets are Mysorean in design, British in manufacture, American in mythology.

TRIUMPH

### Mysore Silk receives Geographical Indication

Mysore Silk is registered as a Geographical Indication on 28 November 2005 (Application No. 11; Certificate No. 14), mandating 65% silver and 0.65% gold zari and weaving within Mysore City Corporation limits. The GI anchors the direct lineage from Tipu's 1786 sericulture project.

TRIUMPH

### KSIC: ₹332 crore and still producing

Karnataka Silk Industries Corporation records gross Mysore-Silk-saree sales of ₹332.15 crore in 2024–25, after-tax profit ₹101.15 crore. Karnataka produces 12,463 metric tonnes of raw silk — 32% of India's national output and 42% of mulberry silk production. Ramanagara, 50 km from Srirangapatna, sells 40,000–50,000 kg of cocoons daily.

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