

KARNATAKA THROUGH THE AGES: POLITICAL FORMATION, CULTURAL SYNTHESIS AND THE MAKING OF A MODERN STATE

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ABSTRACT

Karnataka occupies a distinctive place in Indian history because its political boundaries, linguistic identity and cultural traditions were formed through repeated interaction among the Deccan plateau, the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. This paper presents a synthetic history of Karnataka from early state formation to the creation of the modern linguistic state. Using a qualitative historical method and evidence from inscriptions, monuments, official histories and established scholarship, it examines the Kadambas, Western Gangas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagara Empire, Deccan Sultanates, Wodeyars of Mysore, colonial rule, the freedom struggle and the Karnataka unification movement. The study argues that Karnataka's history cannot be reduced to a sequence of dynasties. Its deeper continuity lies in the growth of Kannada as a public language, the interaction of religious and artistic traditions, the development of agrarian and commercial networks, and recurrent negotiation between regional autonomy and larger imperial structures. The unification of Kannada-speaking territories in 1956 and the renaming of Mysore State as Karnataka in 1973 transformed this long cultural region into a modern political unit. Yet regional inequalities and plural identities remained important. Karnataka emerged not through uniformity, but through cultural synthesis and the political integration of historically diverse regions.

KEYWORDS: Karnataka, Kannada, Chalukyas, Vijayanagara, Mysore, unification movement, regional identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Karnataka is both regional and transregional. Its territory links the northern and southern Deccan, the forested Western Ghats and a coastline connected for centuries with Indian Ocean commerce. These geographical zones encouraged multiple centres of power rather than a single permanent capital. Banavasi, Badami, Manyakheta, Kalyana, Dwarasamudra, Vijayanagara, Srirangapatna, Mysore and Bengaluru successively

acquired political importance. Their monuments, inscriptions and literary traditions reveal a region repeatedly integrated by states but never culturally isolated from neighbouring areas.

The word “Karnataka” has an old and complex history, while the boundaries of the present state are comparatively recent. Kannada-speaking communities were divided under British provinces and several princely states until the linguistic reorganisation of 1956. A historical account must therefore distinguish between Karnataka as a cultural-linguistic region and Karnataka as a modern administrative state. This paper asks how political institutions, language, religion, economy and social movements contributed to the making of Karnataka across time.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The paper has four objectives: to trace major phases of political change; to examine Karnataka’s contribution to literature, architecture and religious thought; to analyse the effects of colonialism and the freedom struggle; and to explain the unification of Kannada-speaking regions. It adopts a descriptive and analytical historical method. Evidence is drawn from official Government of Karnataka histories, Archaeological Survey of India descriptions of protected monuments, UNESCO heritage documentation, inscriptions as discussed in historical scholarship, and major secondary works. The method treats dynastic chronology as a framework rather than the entire subject, giving equal attention to cultural exchange, political economy and regional identity.

3. EARLY KARNATAKA AND THE FIRST REGIONAL KINGDOMS

Archaeological remains indicate human settlement in the Karnataka region from prehistoric times. By the early historic period, parts of the area were connected to wider political and commercial systems associated with the Mauryas and Satavahanas. Prakrit and Sanskrit inscriptions, megalithic remains, coins and trade routes show that the Deccan was neither remote nor static. Agricultural expansion and exchange between inland settlements and western ports helped create the material basis for regional states.

The Kadambas of Banavasi, conventionally dated from the fourth century CE, are important because they established one of the earliest durable kingdoms rooted in the region. Their inscriptions demonstrate the increasing public use of Kannada alongside Sanskrit. The Western Gangas, ruling mainly in southern Karnataka from centres such as Talakad, supported irrigation, agrarian settlements, Jain institutions and temple patronage. The colossal image of Gommateshwara at Shravanabelagola, commissioned in the tenth century by the Ganga minister Chavundaraya, illustrates the close relationship among political authority, religious patronage and artistic production.

4. CHALUKYAS, RASHTRAKUTAS AND THE CLASSICAL DECCAN

The Early Chalukyas of Badami, from the sixth to the eighth centuries, made the northern Karnataka region a centre of Deccan power. Under Pulakeshin II, their authority extended across much of peninsular India and confronted the north Indian emperor Harsha. More enduring than territorial conquest was the Chalukyan architectural experiment at Badami, Aihole and Pattadakal. Rock-cut shrines and structural temples combined northern and southern forms. The Archaeological Survey of India describes Pattadakal as both a major Chalukyan

architectural centre and a place of royal coronation, where Nagara and Dravida temple forms were brought into creative dialogue (ASI, n.d.-a).

The Rashtrakutas, whose imperial centre was Manyakheta, succeeded the Chalukyas in the eighth century and built a powerful Deccan empire. Their rule connected Karnataka with Gujarat, central India and the Tamil country. Royal patronage extended to Sanskrit, Kannada and Jain learning; the ninth-century Kavirajamarga is a landmark in the history of Kannada literary culture. The Later Chalukyas of Kalyana renewed political authority in the western Deccan from the tenth to twelfth centuries. Their temples developed transitional forms that influenced Hoysala architecture.

5. HOYSALAS AND THE EXPANSION OF REGIONAL CULTURE

The Hoysalas emerged from the Malnad and established their principal centre at Dwarasamudra, present-day Halebidu. Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, they expanded across much of southern Karnataka. Their political history involved competition and accommodation with the Cholas, Chalukyas, Yadavas and other powers. Hoysala rule also coincided with intensified cultivation, temple-centred settlements and the growth of mercantile networks.

Hoysala temples at Belur, Halebidu and Somanathapura are distinguished by complex plans, soapstone construction and densely carved narrative surfaces. These monuments were not merely religious buildings; they organised patronage, labour, land grants and public memory. Jain, Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions all received support at different times. Kannada and Sanskrit literary production flourished, revealing a multilingual courtly culture rather than an exclusive linguistic order.

6. SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION

Medieval Karnataka was a major arena of religious debate and social criticism. Jain intellectual traditions played a foundational role in Kannada literature. From the twelfth century, the Virashaiva or Lingayat movement associated with Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi and other sharanas used concise Kannada vachanas to question ritual hierarchy, inherited status and social exclusion. The movement was diverse and later institutionalised, but its literary and ethical language remained central to Karnataka's public culture.

Vaishnava traditions also expanded through temples, monasteries and devotional networks. Madhvacharya's Dvaita philosophy at Udupi shaped an influential intellectual lineage. In the Vijayanagara period, the Haridasa tradition, associated with figures such as Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa, connected devotion, music and vernacular expression. Karnataka's religious history therefore shows both institutional patronage and recurring efforts to broaden access to spiritual and literary life.

7. VIJAYANAGARA AND THE DECCAN SULTANATES

The Vijayanagara Empire was founded in the fourteenth century and made its capital on the Tungabhadra at Hampi. The city became the centre of a state that linked interior agriculture, military power, temple institutions and long-distance commerce. The Archaeological Survey of India dates the principal monuments from 1336 to 1570 and identifies the reign of Krishnadevaraya as a period of extensive royal building (ASI, n.d.-b). UNESCO

notes that Hampi's temples and palaces impressed travellers between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (UNESCO, n.d.).

Vijayanagara should not be interpreted only through a simple Hindu-Muslim opposition. Its administration, military technology, court culture and architecture emerged within a shared Deccan political world that included the Bahmani kingdom and its successor sultanates. Warfare was frequent, but so were diplomacy, commerce, migration and artistic exchange. After the defeat of Vijayanagara forces at Talikota in 1565, the capital was devastated, although the empire continued from other centres. In northern Karnataka, the Bahmani and Adil Shahi states fostered Persianate culture, monumental architecture and a composite Deccan society. Bidar and Bijapur became important centres of scholarship, craft and architecture.

8. MYSORE, HAIDAR ALI AND TIPU SULTAN

The Wodeyars developed Mysore into a significant southern kingdom after the decline of Vijayanagara authority. During the eighteenth century, Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan transformed the state through military reorganisation, centralised revenue practices, diplomatic initiatives and efforts to control strategic trade. Their wars with the East India Company placed Mysore at the centre of the struggle over British expansion in southern India. Tipu Sultan's death at Srirangapatna in 1799 ended this phase and allowed the Company to restore a reduced Wodeyar kingdom under subsidiary control.

Historical interpretations of Tipu Sultan remain politically contested. A balanced assessment must recognise warfare, coercive policies and local conflict while also examining state-building, technological innovation, commercial ambition and anti-Company resistance. Reducing the period to either heroic celebration or total condemnation obscures the complexity of eighteenth-century sovereignty and the varied experiences of different communities.

9. COLONIAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

British paramountcy reorganised Karnataka unevenly. Kannada-speaking areas were divided among the princely state of Mysore, the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, the Nizam's Hyderabad State and smaller territories. This fragmentation affected administration, education, infrastructure and access to public employment. In Mysore, commissioners and later Wodeyar governments developed departments, railways, irrigation, representative institutions and modern education. The state acquired a reputation for planned development, especially under influential diwans, but social privilege and unequal representation generated non-Brahmin political mobilisation.

Resistance to colonial authority included the revolt of Kittur Chennamma and Sangolli Rayanna, peasant and local uprisings, and later participation in the national movement. The 1924 Indian National Congress session at Belagavi, presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, strengthened Karnataka's place in national politics. Salt satyagrahas, forest protests, the Shivapura flag satyagraha, the Vidurashwatha tragedy, the Quit India movement and the Mysore Chalo agitation demonstrated that the freedom struggle developed through distinct regional settings as well as an all-India organisation.

10. KANNADA RENAISSANCE AND THE UNIFICATION MOVEMENT

The unification movement arose from the contradiction between a shared Kannada literary culture and divided administration. Print, schools, literary associations and public conferences created new networks across provincial borders. The Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha, founded at Dharwad in 1890, and the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, founded in Bengaluru in 1915, helped standardise cultural exchange and popularise the idea of a united Karnataka. Writers, teachers, lawyers and political activists turned language into a claim for administrative justice rather than merely cultural pride.

The Government of Karnataka's official history notes that the demand for unification became particularly strong after 1920 (Government of Karnataka, 2021). Aluru Venkata Rao's writings gave the movement historical imagination, while leaders from different Kannada-speaking regions negotiated competing provincial interests. The movement was connected with the wider linguistic reorganisation debate, yet it also addressed practical disadvantages caused by fragmented education, employment and governance.

11. FORMATION OF THE MODERN STATE

The States Reorganisation Act took effect on 1 November 1956. Kannada-majority territories from the former Bombay and Madras States, Hyderabad State and Coorg were integrated with the existing Mysore State. This event—celebrated as Karnataka Rajyotsava—created a much larger political unit, but the name Mysore initially remained. In 1973, the state was officially renamed Karnataka, recognising that its territory and identity extended far beyond the old Mysore kingdom.

Unification did not erase regional diversity. Coastal Karnataka, the Malnad, old Mysore, Kalyana Karnataka, Kittur Karnataka and the Bengaluru region retained distinct social structures, dialects, economic patterns and political memories. Post-independence state-building expanded education, irrigation, industry and democratic representation. Bengaluru's later emergence as a centre of public-sector science and information technology brought global visibility, while agrarian distress, water disputes, uneven development and regional inequality continued to shape public policy.

12. DISCUSSION

Three broad patterns emerge. First, Karnataka's political history alternated between regional kingdoms and incorporation into larger imperial systems, but local institutions and languages persisted. Second, cultural achievement was produced through interaction: Nagara and Dravida forms at Pattadakal, Kannada and Sanskrit literary worlds, Jain, Shaiva, Vaishnava and Islamic traditions, and inland-coastal commercial networks. Third, modern Karnataka was created through democratic linguistic mobilisation rather than the recovery of an unchanged ancient boundary.

This interpretation challenges both dynastic triumphalism and narrow linguistic exclusivism. Kannada supplied a powerful basis for unity, but Karnataka's historical identity was always multilingual and religiously plural. Its monuments and literature record conflict as well as cooperation. Historical understanding therefore requires critical attention to inscriptions, archaeology, material culture and social experience, not the retrospective projection of contemporary political categories onto the past.

13. CONCLUSION

Karnataka's history is a long process of political formation and cultural synthesis. Early regional kingdoms established centres of power and strengthened Kannada expression. Chalukya, Rashtrakuta and Hoysala patronage produced lasting architectural and literary traditions. Vijayanagara and the Deccan Sultanates connected the region to wider military, commercial and artistic worlds. Mysore's contest with the East India Company and its later administrative transformation shaped the transition to colonial modernity. The freedom struggle and unification movement then converted a dispersed linguistic community into a modern state.

The significance of Karnataka lies not in cultural purity but in its ability to combine diverse regions and inheritances. The state formed in 1956 and renamed in 1973 represents a political achievement built upon centuries of linguistic creativity, migration, religious debate and economic exchange. Preserving this heritage requires careful scholarship, conservation of monuments and archives, and an inclusive understanding of the many communities that made Karnataka.

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