

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 emerged through a long process rather than a single founding event. From the early historic polities of the Deccan to the unification of Kannada-speaking regions in 1956, the region repeatedly absorbed new institutions while retaining a strong local character. This paper examines the principal stages in Karnataka's historical development: early state formation under the Kadambas and Gangas; imperial consolidation under the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas; temple-centred political culture under the later Chalukyas and Hoysalas; the cosmopolitan power of Vijayanagara; the successor states of Bijapur, Keladi and Mysore; colonial transformation; and the movement for linguistic unification. It argues that Karnataka's historical identity was created through the interaction of political power, Kannada literary culture, religious plurality, agrarian expansion, trade and regional memory. The state's modern identity is therefore best understood as a layered historical synthesis rather than as the legacy of one dynasty or community.

KEYWORDS: Karnataka; Kannada; Deccan; Vijayanagara; Mysore; unification; regional identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Karnataka is both regional and transregional. Its plateau linked the western coast with the eastern Deccan and connected northern India with the Tamil country. Rivers such as the Krishna, Tungabhadra, Kaveri and their tributaries supported agrarian settlements, while ports on the Arabian Sea connected the interior to long-distance commerce. These geographical conditions encouraged political competition, mobility and cultural exchange. Consequently, the area now called Karnataka was rarely isolated. It interacted continuously with Maharashtra, Andhra, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and overseas trading worlds.

The word "Karnataka" acquired different geographical meanings in different periods. Inscriptions and literary sources used related forms such as Karnata and Kannada-nadu, but premodern political borders did not coincide

with those of the present state. Modern Karnataka was assembled from territories formerly administered by Mysore, Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad and Coorg. A historical study must therefore avoid projecting today's borders unchanged into the past. This paper adopts a chronological and interpretive method, drawing upon inscriptions, architecture, literary traditions and major works of modern scholarship. Its central proposition is that Karnataka's unity developed through recurring connections among language, political institutions, sacred landscapes, economic networks and collective memory.

2. EARLY HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Evidence from megalithic sites, early inscriptions, coins and archaeological remains indicates that the Deccan supported settled agriculture, craft production and exchange before the rise of large regional kingdoms. Under the Mauryas, parts of present Karnataka entered a wider imperial network. Ashokan inscriptions at sites including Brahmagiri, Maski and Sannati demonstrate the reach of Mauryan authority and the circulation of Buddhist ethical ideas. After the Mauryas, the Satavahanas and their successors helped integrate the northern and central Deccan through trade routes, administrative centres and patronage of religious institutions.

The Kadambas of Banavasi, who rose in the fourth century CE, are especially important in regional historical memory. Their establishment of an independent kingdom under Mayurasharma symbolised an early assertion of local political authority. The Talagunda inscription records the dynasty's origin narrative and illustrates how rulers used genealogy and Brahmanical learning to legitimise power. Kadamba records also reveal the growing official use of Kannada alongside Sanskrit. This development did not represent the rejection of Sanskrit; rather, it marked the emergence of a bilingual political culture in which a regional language gained increasing public prestige.

The Western Gangas ruled much of southern Karnataka for several centuries, often negotiating relations with stronger neighbours. Their period witnessed agrarian expansion, land grants and important Jain patronage. The monolithic image of Gommateshwara at Shravanabelagola, commissioned by the minister Chavundaraya in the tenth century, remains a powerful expression of religious devotion, political resources and artistic skill. Early Karnataka thus developed through overlapping rather than exclusive traditions: Jain, Buddhist, Shaiva, Vaishnava and local practices coexisted, competed and interacted.

3. CHALUKYAS, RASHTRAKUTAS AND IMPERIAL KARNATAKA

The Early Chalukyas of Badami transformed the western Deccan into a major centre of power between the sixth and eighth centuries. Pulakeshin II's reign demonstrated the dynasty's military reach and diplomatic importance. The Aihole inscription composed by Ravikirti celebrated his achievements and presented royal power through the refined idiom of Sanskrit court culture. Yet the Chalukyan achievement was not merely military. At Badami, Aihole and Pattadakal, architects experimented with structural and rock-cut forms associated with both northern and southern temple traditions. Pattadakal's monuments show that the Deccan was a creative meeting ground, not a passive frontier between supposedly separate cultural zones.

The Rashtrakutas, ruling from Manyakheta, succeeded in constructing one of the most extensive early medieval empires in India. Their campaigns reached north and south, and their court participated in wider commercial and

intellectual networks. Amoghavarsha I is associated with the Kavirajamarga, the earliest surviving major work on Kannada poetics. The text points to an already developed Kannada literary geography and a community conscious of standards of expression. Rashtrakuta patronage extended to Jain, Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions; the Kailasanatha temple at Ellora, though located outside present Karnataka, reflects the scale and ambition of their imperial culture.

The later Western Chalukyas of Kalyana further reshaped Karnataka between the tenth and twelfth centuries. Their administration depended upon local elites, landed institutions, temples and military chiefs. Architectural sites such as Lakkundi, Gadag, Dambal and Itagi display a transitional style that influenced later Hoysala art. This period also illustrates a recurring feature of Karnataka's history: imperial authority relied upon negotiation with powerful subregional interests. The resulting political order could be productive and culturally rich, but it also remained vulnerable to changing alliances.

4. HOYSALAS, BHAKTI AND SOCIAL DEBATE

The Hoysalas emerged from the hill regions and built a kingdom centred in southern Karnataka. Under rulers such as Vishnuvardhana and Ballala II, they expanded their authority and patronised temples, settlements and literary production. The temples at Belur, Halebidu and Somanathapura are renowned for their complex plans, polished stone and exceptionally detailed sculpture. These monuments should be read not only as works of art but also as institutions connected to land, labour, ritual, education and political legitimacy. Their iconography reflects a plural courtly environment in which Shaiva, Vaishnava and Jain affiliations remained significant.

The twelfth century also produced the Virashaiva or Lingayat movement associated with Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi and other sharanas. Their vachanas used direct Kannada verse to question ritual hierarchy, empty formalism and social inequality while emphasising personal devotion and ethical work. The Anubhava Mantapa survives in memory as a space of spiritual discussion, although its exact historical form is debated. The enduring importance of the vachana tradition lies in its widening of the moral and literary public sphere. It enabled artisans, women and members of marginalised communities to appear as religious voices rather than merely as subjects of elite description.

At the same time, the broader bhakti environment cannot be reduced to one reform movement. Later Haridasa traditions, represented by Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa, enriched Kannada devotional literature and the development of Carnatic music. These traditions reveal that language, devotion and social criticism repeatedly intersected in Karnataka's cultural history.

5. VIJAYANAGARA AND THE COSMOPOLITAN DECCAN

The foundation of Vijayanagara in the fourteenth century marked a decisive reorganisation of south Indian power after the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate and the decline of older regional kingdoms. From its capital at Hampi, the empire governed a large and diverse territory through royal households, provincial commanders, temples, local chiefs and revenue arrangements. Vijayanagara was not simply a "Hindu bulwark" against Muslim states, an older interpretation that oversimplifies the evidence. Its rulers certainly used Hindu kingship and temple

patronage, but the empire also employed Muslims, borrowed military practices, conducted diplomacy with Deccan sultanates and participated in an interconnected commercial world.

Hampi's sacred and royal landscapes disclose the relationship between ritual authority and urban wealth. Markets, water systems, workshops, temples and courtly structures were integrated within a large metropolitan complex. Accounts of foreign visitors, including Abdur Razzaq and Domingo Paes, describe its scale and prosperity, though such narratives must be read critically. Horses, textiles, spices, metals and luxury goods circulated through routes linking the interior to coastal ports. The reign of Krishnadevaraya combined military expansion with literary and religious patronage; his celebrated Telugu work *Amuktamalyada* also reminds us that Vijayanagara's elite culture was multilingual.

The battle of Talikota in 1565 severely damaged the capital but did not end the empire immediately. Successor rulers continued from other centres, while provincial powers became increasingly autonomous. The ruins of Hampi later became central to modern memories of Karnataka, demonstrating how archaeological landscapes can be repeatedly reinterpreted in the construction of regional identity.

6. SULTANATES, NAYAKAS AND THE RISE OF MYSORE

North Karnataka formed an important part of the Bahmani and later Bijapur Sultanates. These states introduced and adapted Persianate forms of administration, architecture and court culture while drawing upon local soldiers, officials, artisans and revenue systems. The Adil Shahi capital of Bijapur produced monuments such as the Gol Gumbaz and Ibrahim Rauza. Dakhni literature and music flourished in an environment shaped by Persian, Marathi, Kannada, Telugu and local vernacular influences. The history of the sultanates therefore belongs within Karnataka's past rather than outside it.

After Vijayanagara's weakening, regional powers such as the Keladi Nayakas and the Wodeyars of Mysore consolidated authority. Mysore's transformation accelerated under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan in the eighteenth century. They developed a centralised military-fiscal state, expanded arsenals and workshops, reorganised revenue demands and maintained diplomatic links with the French and other powers. Tipu's resistance to the East India Company made him a major figure in anti-colonial memory. At the same time, assessments of his rule remain contested because expansion, coercion, patronage and religious policy varied across regions and circumstances. Historical judgement requires contextual evidence rather than either uncritical glorification or communal caricature.

Following Tipu Sultan's death in 1799, the British restored the Wodeyar dynasty under subsidiary control. Mysore later experienced direct British administration from 1831 to 1881 before the Rendition returned governance to the maharaja. This layered sovereignty prepared the ground for princely-state modernisation while preserving colonial dominance.

7. COLONIAL MODERNITY AND THE MYSORE MODEL

British paramountcy reorganised Karnataka's economy and administration unevenly because Kannada-speaking areas were divided among several jurisdictions. Colonial surveys, cash taxation, commercial crops, railways and new legal arrangements altered rural relations. Forest regulation and market integration brought opportunities for

some groups but imposed serious burdens on peasants, pastoralists and forest-dependent communities. The impact of colonialism must therefore be assessed through both institutional change and social inequality.

In princely Mysore, rulers and diwans invested in irrigation, education, public works and industry. The establishment of representative institutions, Mysore University, hydroelectric development at Shivanasamudra and industries in Bengaluru and Bhadravati contributed to the reputation of a progressive “Mysore model.” Diwans such as K. Sheshadri Iyer and M. Visvesvaraya became associated with planned development and administrative expertise. Nevertheless, modernisation was not socially neutral. Access to education and office remained unequal, producing organised demands from non-Brahmin communities and stimulating debates over representation and reservation.

Print culture gave Kannada intellectuals new means to imagine a wider linguistic community. Newspapers, literary associations, schools and public histories connected people living under different administrations. The Kannada Sahitya Parishat, founded in 1915, played a notable role in language development and cultural mobilisation. Thus colonial fragmentation paradoxically strengthened the desire for linguistic unity.

8. FREEDOM STRUGGLE AND THE UNIFICATION OF KARNATAKA

The national movement in Karnataka drew support from lawyers, teachers, students, peasants, workers and princely-state activists. Gangadharrao Deshpande promoted Gandhian mobilisation, while the 1924 Belgaum session of the Indian National Congress, presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, gave the region a prominent place in nationalist history. Forest satyagrahas, no-tax campaigns, labour action and movements for responsible government translated national ideas into local struggles. Women participated in picketing, khadi work, underground networks and public protest, even though conventional political histories often understate their contributions.

The demand for a unified Kannada-speaking province developed alongside, but was not identical with, the freedom movement. Aluru Venkata Rao’s Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava invoked historical memory to encourage unity. Organisations and literary conferences argued that dispersed Kannada regions shared linguistic and cultural interests despite different administrative experiences. After independence, the princely state of Mysore joined the Indian Union, but the territorial question remained unresolved.

The States Reorganisation Act of 1956 brought together most Kannada-speaking territories from the former states of Mysore, Bombay, Madras and Hyderabad, along with Coorg, into an enlarged Mysore State. This was an extraordinary administrative and emotional achievement, yet unification also created the challenge of integrating regions with unequal infrastructure and distinct political traditions. In 1973 the state was renamed Karnataka, a name better suited to its wider geography. The continuing importance of Kalyana Karnataka, Kittur Karnataka, coastal Karnataka and the Old Mysore region shows that statewide identity coexists with strong subregional identities.

9. DISCUSSION: CONTINUITY, DIVERSITY AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

Three themes emerge from this survey. First, Kannada served as a durable medium of identity, but Karnataka was never culturally monolingual. Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian, Dakhni, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Konkani, Tulu, Kodava

and Urdu contributed to its history. A confident regional history recognises these interactions rather than treating diversity as dilution.

Second, political authority was continually constructed through local institutions. Dynasties depended upon chiefs, village bodies, religious establishments, merchants, military groups and agrarian producers. Even powerful empires could not rule the plateau through central command alone. This helps explain both the region's repeated imperial achievements and its resilient local identities.

Third, the public meaning of the past changes over time. Basavanna, Tipu Sultan, Krishnadevaraya, Kittur Rani Chennamma and Visvesvaraya have been remembered in different ways by nationalist, regional, caste and political movements. Historical memory can inspire social solidarity, but selective memory can also sharpen conflict. Professional history must therefore distinguish evidence-based interpretation from present-day appropriation. It should incorporate inscriptions and court chronicles while also recovering the experiences of women, subordinate castes, tribal communities, artisans and cultivators.

10. CONCLUSION

Karnataka's history is the history of a region repeatedly made and remade. Early dynasties established centres of political and linguistic authority; Chalukya, Rashtrakuta and Hoysala patronage produced influential institutions and artistic forms; devotional movements enlarged Kannada's ethical and literary range; Vijayanagara and the Deccan sultanates linked the region to expansive political and commercial networks; Mysore confronted colonial power and later became a laboratory of princely modernisation; and the unification movement converted linguistic consciousness into a modern territorial state.

No single dynasty, religion or locality can adequately represent this long experience. Karnataka's enduring strength has come from the capacity to combine local attachment with wider exchange. Understanding this layered past is especially important today, when heritage is often compressed into celebratory slogans or polarised controversy. A critical and inclusive history can preserve regional pride while recognising conflict, inequality and cultural interdependence. Such an approach makes Karnataka's past not merely a record of rulers and monuments, but a continuing resource for democratic citizenship.

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