

KARNATAKA THROUGH THE AGES

State Formation, Cultural Synthesis and Historical Change

***DR. VISWANATH KS**

**Associate Professor Department of History Government First Grade College, Bellavi
Tumkur District, Bellavi - 572107*

ABSTRACT

Karnataka's history is distinguished by remarkable political continuity amid repeated changes of dynasty, language, religion and territorial organization. Situated between the western coast and the Deccan interior, the region linked maritime trade with inland agrarian and urban networks. This paper examines the principal stages of Karnataka's historical development: early state formation under the Kadambas and Gangas; imperial expansion under the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas; the cultural achievements of the Hoysalas and Vijayanagara; the rise of Mysore; colonial transformation; and linguistic unification in the twentieth century. Rather than treating dynastic succession as the whole of history, the study emphasizes institutions, irrigation, commerce, temple patronage, literary production and social negotiation. It argues that Karnataka emerged not from a single kingdom or homogeneous tradition, but through the long interaction of Kannada-speaking communities with Sanskrit, Jain, Virashaiva, Vaishnava, Islamic, Christian and modern constitutional cultures. The unification of 1956 brought together territories shaped by different administrations, while the renaming of Mysore State as Karnataka in 1973 gave symbolic recognition to a wider historical geography. Karnataka's past therefore reveals a durable pattern: regional identity grew through adaptation and synthesis while retaining Kannada language and memory as important sources of cohesion.

KEYWORDS: Karnataka; Kannada; Deccan; state formation; Vijayanagara; Mysore; unification

1. INTRODUCTION

The historical region now called Karnataka occupies a strategic position in peninsular India. Its western edge opens to the Arabian Sea, its plateau forms part of the Deccan, and its river systems connect zones of cultivation, pastoralism, craft production and trade. Such geography made the region both a political heartland and a corridor between northern and southern India. Inscriptions, monuments, coins, literary works, foreign travel accounts,

administrative records and oral traditions together reveal a history that is locally rooted yet continuously connected to wider worlds.

This paper adopts a chronological and analytical method. It draws upon established epigraphic and historical scholarship to interpret changes in power, economy and culture. The term “Karnataka” has carried varying geographical meanings across time; it should not be projected unchanged onto every early polity. Nevertheless, Kannada inscriptions, regional political centres and shared cultural practices permit the reconstruction of a long historical process. Three questions guide the discussion: How did states consolidate authority? How did diverse religious and literary traditions shape public culture? How did modern Karnataka emerge from territories governed under different regimes?

2. SOURCES AND HISTORICAL METHOD

Stone and copper-plate inscriptions are central to Karnataka historiography because they record grants, titles, genealogies, taxation, irrigation and local institutions. Literary sources illuminate political ideals and social values but require critical reading. Architecture and sculpture disclose technology, patronage and ritual geography, while colonial records provide abundant data coloured by administrative priorities. A balanced history therefore compares multiple forms of evidence and avoids reducing the past either to royal biography or to modern identity claims.

3. EARLY KARNATAKA: POLITICS AND REGIONAL FOUNDATIONS

Evidence from prehistoric sites and the Mauryan inscriptions found in Karnataka indicates that the region was connected to subcontinental political and commercial networks at an early date. After the Mauryan age, the Satavahanas exercised influence over parts of the Deccan. Their decline created space for more clearly regional powers. The Kadambas of Banavasi, beginning in the fourth century CE, are especially significant because they developed an independent kingdom in the western Deccan and employed Kannada alongside Sanskrit in administration. The Halmidi inscription, conventionally dated to the fifth or sixth century, is among the earliest extensive Kannada inscriptions and marks the growing public authority of the language.

The Western Gangas ruled much of southern Karnataka from centres such as Talakad for several centuries. Their administration rested on agrarian revenues and alliances with local elites. Jainism received notable patronage, culminating in the monumental image of Bahubali at Shravanabelagola, commissioned in the tenth century by the minister Chamundaraya. Yet Ganga society was religiously plural, and patronage also supported Brahmanical institutions. This coexistence became a recurring feature of Karnataka's political culture.

4. CHALUKYAS AND RASHTRAKUTAS: THE DECCAN AS AN IMPERIAL CENTRE

The Early Chalukyas of Badami transformed the Deccan into a major arena of imperial politics during the sixth to eighth centuries. Pulakeshin II extended authority widely and resisted the north Indian ruler Harsha on the Narmada frontier. Chalukya power was not merely military. At Badami, Aihole and Pattadakal, builders experimented with structural and rock-cut forms associated with both northern and southern temple traditions. Pattadakal's monuments demonstrate that artistic exchange did not follow rigid regional boundaries.

The Rashtrakutas, ruling from Manyakheta between the eighth and tenth centuries, succeeded the Chalukyas and projected power across much of India. Their court supported Sanskrit and Kannada scholarship, Jain learning and ambitious architecture. The Kailasanatha temple at Ellora, created under Rashtrakuta patronage, testifies to the resources and technical coordination of the state. Amoghavarsha I is associated with the Kavirajamarga, the earliest surviving major work on Kannada poetics, which refers to a recognized Kannada cultural domain and a mature literary community.

The Later Chalukyas of Kalyana restored regional power in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Their period witnessed institutional change, expanding temple networks and refined architectural forms that bridged earlier Chalukya experimentation and later Hoysala elaboration. Local bodies, landed intermediaries, merchants and religious establishments all participated in governance. Kingship was therefore negotiated through grants, honours and protection rather than imposed uniformly from the capital.

5. ECONOMY, SETTLEMENTS AND SOCIAL ORDER

Medieval Karnataka's economy combined dry farming, irrigated cultivation, animal husbandry, mining, crafts and long-distance trade. Tanks and canals required collective maintenance and royal or elite investment. Merchant associations operated across the peninsula and connected inland production with ports on the western coast. Inscriptions show occupational groups, village assemblies and temple establishments managing resources. They also record hierarchies of caste and gender, reminding us that cultural achievement coexisted with unequal access to property and authority.

6. HOYSALAS: COURT, TEMPLE AND VERNACULAR CULTURE

The Hoysalas rose from the Malnad region and established an influential kingdom in southern Karnataka between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Their political centres included Belur, Halebidu and later areas around the Kaveri basin. Hoysala rulers navigated competition with Cholas, Chalukyas, Pandyas and other powers through warfare, diplomacy and strategic patronage. The kingdom drew strength from agrarian expansion and from links between the uplands and fertile southern plains.

Hoysala temples at Belur, Halebidu and Somanathapura are renowned for their star-shaped plans, soapstone construction and densely carved narrative surfaces. These monuments were products of organized workshops and named artisans as well as royal ambition. Their imagery joins Shaiva, Vaishnava and Jain themes, making them archives of religious plurality, costume, performance, warfare and everyday life. Kannada and Sanskrit literary activity flourished at court and in religious communities. Writers such as Janna and Harihara helped make Kannada a vehicle for sophisticated narrative, ethics and devotion.

7. RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Twelfth-century Kalyana became associated with the Virashaiva or Lingayat movement and the vachana tradition. Basavanna, Akka Mahadevi, Allama Prabhu and other sharanas composed direct, powerful reflections on devotion, work, ritual and inequality. The experience of the Anubhava Mantapa is remembered as a forum for

spiritual and social discussion. Although later institutional histories were complex, the vachanas enlarged Kannada's expressive possibilities and offered enduring critiques of empty ritual and inherited status.

Jain communities made foundational contributions to Kannada literature, education, commerce and art. Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions also developed through temples, mathas, pilgrimage and vernacular composition. Madhvacharya's Dvaita philosophy, associated especially with Udupi, created a major intellectual and devotional lineage. These traditions sometimes competed for patronage, yet they also shared languages, artistic practices and public spaces. Karnataka's cultural history is best understood as an arena of sustained encounter rather than isolated religious compartments.

8. VIJAYANAGARA AND THE REORGANIZATION OF THE SOUTH

The foundation of Vijayanagara in the fourteenth century created a durable imperial centre at Hampi. From the Sangama through the Tuluva rulers, the empire incorporated diverse linguistic and ecological regions. Under Krishnadevaraya in the early sixteenth century, military power, courtly literature and temple patronage reached a celebrated height. Administration relied upon provincial chiefs and nayakas, while revenues from agriculture supported armies, cities and ritual institutions.

Hampi's extensive remains—fortifications, bazaars, waterworks, temples and elite enclosures—show a city shaped by both sacred geography and commercial life. Horses, textiles, spices and precious goods linked Vijayanagara to Indian Ocean trade. Persianate political practices, Deccani military labour and interactions with Portuguese merchants formed part of this world. The battle of Talikota in 1565 shattered the capital's dominance but did not instantly erase the state. Successor centres and nayaka polities preserved many institutions and cultural forms.

9. SULTANATES, COASTAL WORLDS AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Northern Karnataka was deeply shaped by the Bahmani Sultanate and its Deccan successor states, particularly the Adil Shahis of Bijapur. Their courts fostered Persian, Dakhni, Marathi and Kannada interactions. Bijapur's architecture, including the Gol Gumbaz and Ibrahim Rauza, reflects technical accomplishment and cosmopolitan patronage. Sufi shrines, court workshops and military settlements created new networks of mobility. Conflict between Vijayanagara and the sultanates was real, but a simple civilizational opposition is misleading: alliances crossed religious lines, specialists moved between courts, and political rivalry coexisted with cultural borrowing.

On the coast, ports connected Karnataka with Arabia, Africa and other parts of Asia. Pepper, rice, textiles, horses and forest products circulated through these networks. Portuguese intervention altered maritime power after 1500, while local rulers and trading communities retained important roles. Coastal society developed distinctive combinations of Kannada, Tulu, Konkani, Beary and other linguistic traditions. This diversity complicates any account that equates Karnataka's history with the plateau alone.

10. MYSORE, HAIDAR ALI AND TIPU SULTAN

The Wodeyars established the kingdom of Mysore after Vijayanagara's decline and gradually expanded their authority. In the eighteenth century, Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan made Mysore one of the most powerful states

confronting the English East India Company. They strengthened the army, experimented with rockets, reorganized revenue and sought diplomatic and commercial connections beyond India. Tipu promoted sericulture and state-regulated commerce while deploying an idiom of sovereign authority suited to an age of intense warfare.

The four Anglo-Mysore Wars ended with Tipu Sultan's death at Srirangapatna in 1799. Historical interpretations of his rule remain politically contested. A sound assessment must distinguish evidence from retrospective myth: his government combined innovation and resistance to Company expansion with coercive campaigns characteristic of eighteenth-century state-building. After 1799, the British restored a reduced Wodeyar kingdom under subsidiary control, marking a decisive shift in regional sovereignty.

11. COLONIAL TRANSFORMATION AND PRINCELY MYSORE

British paramountcy divided Kannada-speaking areas among the princely state of Mysore, the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, the Nizam's dominions and smaller jurisdictions. This fragmented administration produced different systems of land revenue, education, law and infrastructure. In Mysore, direct British administration from 1831 to 1881 was followed by the Rendition, which restored governance to the Wodeyar dynasty under colonial supervision.

Princely Mysore gained a reputation for planned development. Representative institutions evolved gradually; railways, irrigation, public works and modern education expanded. The establishment of the University of Mysore in 1916 and industrial initiatives under figures such as K. Sheshadri Iyer and M. Visvesvaraya became emblematic of the state's modernizing ambition. Projects including the Krishna Raja Sagara dam supported agriculture and electrification. Yet modernization remained uneven: rural debt, caste inequality and limited political representation generated criticism and organized movements.

12. PUBLIC CULTURE, REFORM AND THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed new forms of Kannada public culture. Printing, newspapers, literary associations, schools and historical research helped speakers across administrative borders imagine a shared region. The Kannada literary renaissance drew upon classical works while responding to colonial modernity. B. M. Srikantiah, Masti Venkatesha Iyengar, D. R. Bendre, Kuvempu and many others broadened modern Kannada literature, although their genres and ideological positions differed.

Anti-caste and social reform currents challenged entrenched exclusion. The non-Brahmin movement, Dalit assertion, women's education, labour organization and debates over reservation reshaped public life. The freedom struggle in Karnataka included Congress mobilization, the Khilafat and civil disobedience movements, peasant protests and resistance in princely territories. The 1924 Belgaum Congress session, presided over by Mahatma Gandhi, symbolized Karnataka's place within national politics. Local activists translated the national movement into campaigns grounded in regional conditions.

13. THE MOVEMENT FOR UNIFICATION

The demand to unite Kannada-speaking territories arose from the practical and cultural consequences of colonial fragmentation. Organizations such as the Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha at Dharwad and the Kannada Sahitya Parishat promoted language, literature and historical consciousness. Aluru Venkata Rao's writings gave the movement intellectual force by presenting Karnataka's past as a basis for political unity. Unification was not simply sentimental; supporters argued that administration, education and economic planning would improve when Kannada-speaking districts were brought together.

After independence, the princely state of Mysore joined the Indian Union. The States Reorganisation Act of 1956 enlarged Mysore State by incorporating major Kannada-speaking areas from Bombay State, Hyderabad State, Madras State and Coorg. The integration created administrative and developmental challenges because the constituent regions had inherited unequal institutions and infrastructure. In 1973, Mysore State was renamed Karnataka, acknowledging that the state extended far beyond the old Mysore kingdom.

14. KARNATAKA AFTER 1956

Post-unification Karnataka combined electoral democracy with expanding education, irrigation, industry and urbanization. Bengaluru developed from an administrative, military and industrial centre into a global hub for science, aerospace and information technology. Public-sector institutions and research establishments created a base later used by private technology industries. At the same time, the state's economy remained regionally uneven, with persistent differences between Bengaluru, the coast, old Mysore, Kalyana Karnataka and parts of northern Karnataka.

Language policy, river-water sharing, agrarian distress, urban growth, environmental protection and social justice have remained major public questions. The reorganization did not dissolve subregional identities; rather, modern Karnataka became a federal space in which multiple memories and interests are negotiated. Literature, cinema, theatre, folk traditions and movements for the recognition of marginalized histories continue to revise the meaning of Kannada identity.

15. DISCUSSION

Several patterns emerge from this survey. Political authority repeatedly depended on alliances with local elites, religious institutions, merchants and military intermediaries. Cultural vitality often grew from plural patronage and movement across boundaries. Kannada supplied continuity, but it developed through sustained engagement with Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian, Dakhni, Urdu, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Tulu, Konkani and English. Modern regional identity selected and reinterpreted elements of this layered past. Historical scholarship must therefore resist both dynastic triumphalism and narratives that turn premodern conflicts into fixed modern antagonisms.

16. CONCLUSION

Karnataka's history is neither a single uninterrupted political story nor a loose collection of unrelated dynasties. It is the history of a region created through changing relationships among landscape, language, power and cultural

exchange. The Kadambas and Gangas strengthened early regional institutions; the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas placed the Deccan at the centre of subcontinental politics; the Hoysalas produced distinctive artistic and literary forms; and Vijayanagara reorganized political and commercial life across southern India. The sultanates and coastal networks deepened Karnataka's cosmopolitan character, while Mysore's resistance, accommodation and modernization shaped the transition to colonial and postcolonial government.

The unification of 1956 was the political culmination of a modern linguistic movement, but it also initiated the continuing work of integrating historically unequal regions. Karnataka's heritage belongs equally to inscriptions and oral memory, temples and mosques, courts and workshops, reformers and ordinary communities. Its most durable characteristic is not isolation but creative synthesis. Recognizing this complexity allows history to serve democratic understanding rather than narrow pride. It also shows why preserving archives, monuments, languages and local traditions is essential: they enable future generations to interpret the many pathways through which Karnataka came into being.

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