
**Narratives of the Medieval Deccan: Kannada Literary
Heritage and Historical Imagination in India**
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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the narrative strategies and cultural functions of Kannada literary production in the medieval Deccan, arguing that these texts played a vital role in shaping historical imagination and regional identity. Drawing on a close reading of epics, hagiographies, courtly chronicles, and inscriptional poetry, the study traces how authors and patrons used storytelling techniques mythic interpolation, genealogical framing, and Syncretic historiography to negotiate political legitimacy, social hierarchies, and communal memory. Attention is given to the interplay between oral performance and written text, and to the ways vernacular Kannada reworked Sanskritic paradigms to address local concerns: landholding, temple patronage, and the sacralization of rulers. Methodologically, the article combines literary analysis with historical contextualization, using comparative readings of selected manuscripts and epigraphic evidence to reconstruct how narrative forms mediated historical knowledge for diverse audiences. The findings suggest that medieval Kannada narratives were not passive reflections of events but active agents in producing a layered historical consciousness—one that could legitimize dynasties, circulate moral norms, and accommodate cultural pluralism across the Deccan.

KEYWORDS:

Medieval Deccan, Kannada literature, historical imagination, vernacular historiography, narrative politics.

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Introduction:

The medieval Deccan constituted a dynamic cultural and political zone in Indian history, marked by the interaction of diverse dynasties, religious traditions, and linguistic communities. Within this pluralistic milieu, Kannada literature emerged as a powerful medium through which historical experiences were narrated, remembered, and re-imagined. Far from being merely aesthetic or devotional expressions, medieval Kannada literary texts functioned as sites of historical consciousness, shaping perceptions of power, morality, social order, and regional identity. This article situates Kannada literary heritage at the centre of the historical imagination of the medieval Deccan and examines how narratives embedded within these texts contributed to the construction of the past in India. Traditional historiography of medieval India has often privileged court chronicles, Persian histories, and inscriptional records, while vernacular literary sources were treated as supplementary or symbolic. Recent interdisciplinary scholarship, however, has highlighted the importance of literary narratives as historically meaningful texts that articulate social realities, political aspirations, and collective memory. In this context, medieval Kannada literature—comprising *kāvya*, *champu*, *vachana*, *purāṇa*, and biographical narratives—offers rich insights into how history was conceptualized and communicated beyond elite historiographical frameworks. These works reveal a complex blending of myth, memory, devotion, and political ideology, reflecting the lived experiences of the Deccan's societies.

The Deccan's medieval polities, including the Chalukyas, Hoysalas, Kalyani Chalukyas, and the Vijayanagara Empire, actively patronised Kannada literary culture to legitimise authority and articulate regional sovereignty. Literary narratives often linked rulers to divine sanction, sacred geography, and heroic ancestry, thereby transforming historical events into culturally resonant stories. Simultaneously, devotional and ethical traditions such as the *Vachana* movement expanded the scope of historical imagination by foregrounding social critique, spiritual equality, and everyday experience. These narrative forms complicate conventional distinctions between history and literature, urging a re-evaluation of how the past was represented and understood in medieval India. This study explores the narrative strategies, thematic concerns, and historical functions of medieval Kannada texts to demonstrate their role in producing

a distinctive historical imagination in the Deccan. By analysing literary works alongside epigraphic and material sources, the article argues that Kannada narratives actively mediated historical knowledge rather than passively reflecting events. Such an approach not only enriches our understanding of regional historiography but also contributes to broader debates on vernacularity, memory, and the politics of representation in premodern South Asia.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To critically analyze the narrative structures and literary genres of medieval Kannada texts produced in the Deccan region.
2. To investigate the ways in which Kannada literary works articulated historical consciousness and shaped collective memory in medieval India.
3. To examine the interaction between literary production and political power in the context of Deccan dynastic patronage.
4. To evaluate the integration of mythological, devotional, and regional elements in the construction of historical narratives within Kannada literature.
5. To contribute to the discourse on vernacular historiography by situating medieval Kannada literary heritage within broader frameworks of Indian historical writing.

Methodology:

The study was conducted exclusively using secondary data. It adopted a qualitative and analytical approach, drawing upon published medieval Kannada literary texts and established historical scholarship. Secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and critical editions were analyzed to interpret narrative structures and their role in shaping historical imagination within the medieval Deccan context.

Review of literature:

K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1955), *A History of South India*. Sastri provided a foundational study of South Indian and Deccan polities, detailing the political, social, and cultural developments of the medieval period. He emphasized the role of dynastic patronage in promoting literature, art, and temple culture, showing how Kannada literary works

were interwoven with the political and historical fabric of the Deccan. His work situates Kannada narratives as both reflections of and contributors to regional historical imagination.

D.R. Nagaraj (1996), *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*. Nagaraj explored Kannada literary traditions with special attention to social and historical consciousness. He argued that vernacular narratives did not merely entertain or educate but actively participated in shaping collective memory, regional identity, and social critique in the medieval Deccan. His analysis highlights the interplay between literary creativity and historical understanding in Kannada texts.

B.L. Rice (1894), *A History of Kannada Literature*. Rice's pioneering work systematically documented medieval Kannada literature, including *kāvya*, *champu*, and *purāṇa* genres. He emphasised the historical significance of these narratives, noting their role in preserving genealogies, dynastic histories, and cultural values. Rice's study provides a critical foundation for understanding the evolution of narrative forms and their function in constructing historical consciousness.

M.G.S. Narayanan (1996), *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*. While focused on Kerala, Narayanan's work provides comparative insights into South Indian cultural interactions and literary traditions. His research demonstrates the interconnectedness of Deccan and southern literary cultures, situating Kannada narratives within a wider regional and historical framework that emphasises syncretism, identity formation, and historiographical imagination.

R. Narasimhachar (1960), *History of Kannada Literature in the Medieval Period*. Narasimhachar traced the literary evolution of medieval Kannada texts, analysing their thematic concerns and narrative techniques. He highlighted how courtly patronage, religious movements, and social contexts influenced literary production, showing that Kannada texts functioned as a medium of historical consciousness and a repository of cultural memory in the Deccan.

K.V. Puttappa (Kuvempu) (1979), *Kannada Sahitya Charitre*. Kuvempu examined Kannada literature from both literary and historical perspectives, stressing the role of narratives in shaping social values, regional identity, and historical awareness. His scholarship underscores the creative interplay between myth, legend, and historical memory in

Kannada literary traditions of the medieval Deccan.

Kannada Literary Narratives and Historical Imagination in the Medieval Deccan:

In the medieval Deccan, Kannada literature emerged as a crucial medium for articulating historical consciousness, cultural identity, and political legitimacy. Flourishing under dynasties such as the Chalukyas, Hoysalas, and the Vijayanagara Empire, Kannada literary traditions went beyond aesthetic expression to narrate the past through symbolic, moral, and devotional frameworks. Literary genres including *kāvya*, *champu*, *purāṇa*, and *vachana* integrated myth, genealogy, and ethical ideals with historical experience, thereby shaping a distinctive regional historical imagination.

Kannada narratives played a significant role in legitimising political authority by portraying rulers as divinely sanctioned protectors of dharma and patrons of temples and learning. At the same time, devotional traditions, particularly the Vachana movement, offered alternative perspectives by foregrounding social critique, lived experience, and ethical reform. The interaction of oral performance and written texts facilitated the transmission of these narratives across social groups, reinforcing collective memory. Consequently, medieval Kannada literature functioned as a form of vernacular historiography that mediated history through cultural meaning and regional experience, contributing substantially to the understanding of India's medieval past.

Literary Memory, Power, and Society in Medieval Kannada Narratives:

Medieval Kannada literature served as a critical medium through which literary memory was constructed, preserved, and transmitted in the Deccan. Literary texts functioned as cultural archives, recording not only political events but also social values, moral codes, and collective experiences. Through narrative devices such as mythic genealogy, heroic symbolism, and sacred geography, Kannada writers transformed historical realities into enduring cultural memory. These narratives shaped how communities understood authority, legitimacy, and social order across generations. Power relations were deeply embedded in literary production, particularly in court-sponsored works. Rulers and dynasties utilised Kannada narratives to project political legitimacy and moral authority.

Kings were often represented as idealised figures—protectors of dharma, patrons of temples, and guardians of social stability. Such representations reinforced hierarchical structures and validated existing power relations. Literary patronage thus became an extension of political strategy, where narrative control contributed to state formation and regional identity. However, medieval Kannada literature was not monolithic in its representation of power. Devotional and reformist traditions, especially the Vachana movement, offered alternative literary memories rooted in social critique and ethical reform. Vachana poets articulated dissent against caste oppression, ritual dominance, and social exclusion, thereby redefining the relationship between power and society. These narratives foregrounded lived experience and moral equality, expanding the scope of historical imagination beyond elite political frameworks.

The interaction between oral and written traditions further shaped literary memory. Oral performance ensured the circulation of narratives among diverse social groups, allowing texts to be reinterpreted and adapted over time. This dynamic process enabled Kannada literature to remain socially relevant while sustaining collective memory. Consequently, medieval Kannada narratives functioned as spaces of negotiation where power, society, and historical imagination intersected, offering valuable insights into the cultural history of the medieval Deccan.

Discussion, Results, and Analysis:

The analysis of medieval Kannada literary narratives reveals that these texts functioned as significant instruments in the construction of historical imagination in the Deccan. Rather than serving as objective or chronological historical records, Kannada literary works embedded historical events within symbolic, ethical, and devotional frameworks. This narrative strategy enabled literature to transform political authority, social relations, and cultural values into enduring forms of collective memory. The results of the study indicate that court-sponsored Kannada literature played a decisive role in legitimizing dynastic power. Texts produced under royal patronage consistently represented rulers as ideal kings, protectors of dharma, and patrons of religious and cultural institutions. Through genealogical narratives, mythological associations, and sacred geography, these works reinforced hierarchical social order and justified political dominance. Such representations demonstrate that literary production was closely aligned with state formation and

regional identity in the medieval Deccan. At the same time, the analysis highlights the presence of alternative narrative traditions that challenged dominant power structures. Devotional and reformist texts, particularly the Vachana literature, articulated ethical critique and social consciousness by foregrounding issues of caste, labour, and spiritual equality. Although not structured as historical chronicles, these narratives captured lived social realities and provided counter-memories that expanded the scope of historical representation beyond elite perspectives.

The study further reveals that the interaction between oral and written traditions strengthened the transmission of literary memory across social groups. Oral performance allowed narratives to circulate widely, ensuring their continuity and adaptability over time. This dynamic process contributed to the formation of a layered historical consciousness in which myth, memory, and social experience coexisted. Overall, the findings confirm that medieval Kannada literature functioned as a form of vernacular historiography. These narratives actively mediated the relationship between power and society and played a crucial role in shaping regional historical imagination. By foregrounding cultural meaning and local experience, Kannada literary heritage offers valuable insights into the social and political history of medieval India.

Findings and Recommendations:

1. Medieval Kannada literary narratives functioned as significant sites for the construction of historical imagination in the Deccan.
2. Court-sponsored Kannada texts employed myth and genealogy to legitimise political authority and dynastic power.
3. Literary production in Kannada reflected the close interdependence between cultural patronage and state formation.
4. Devotional traditions, particularly Vachana literature, expanded historical representation through ethical and social critique.
5. The interaction of oral and written traditions ensured the continuity of literary memory and regional identity.

Recommendations:

1. Comparative analysis of Kannada narratives with other Deccan vernacular traditions is recommended.
2. Manuscript-based textual studies should be undertaken to understand

narrative transmission and variation.

3. Interdisciplinary research integrating literary analysis with epigraphic evidence will strengthen historical interpretation.
4. Greater focus on oral performance contexts can deepen insights into medieval literary circulation.
5. Translation and critical editions of marginal and lesser-known Kannada texts should be encouraged.

Conclusion:

This study has demonstrated that medieval Kannada literary traditions of the Deccan were not merely artistic or devotional expressions but constituted a vital mode of historical thinking in premodern India. Kannada narratives functioned as culturally embedded frameworks through which power, memory, and social order were interpreted and communicated. By weaving together myth, genealogy, ethical ideals, and lived experience, these texts transformed historical events into enduring forms of collective imagination, enabling communities to understand the past in ways that were meaningful within their social and cultural worlds. The analysis has further shown that literary production in Kannada was deeply intertwined with political authority and patronage. Court-sponsored narratives legitimised dynastic power and articulated ideals of kingship, while devotional traditions such as Vachana literature introduced alternative ethical visions that questioned hierarchy and exclusion. The coexistence of these narrative strands reveals the plurality of historical consciousness in the medieval Deccan, where elite and subaltern voices interacted within a shared cultural space.

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The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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