

# Contribution of Hoysalas to literature and art of Karnataka

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## Abstract

The Hoysala Empire was a Kannadiga power originating from the Indian subcontinent, that ruled most of what is now Karnataka, India, between the 10th and the 14th centuries. The capital of the Hoysalas was initially located at Belur but was later moved to Halebidu. The Hoysala rulers were originally from Malenadu, an elevated region in the Western Ghats. In the 12th century, taking advantage of the internecine warfare between the Western Chalukya Empire and Kalachuris of Kalyani, they annexed areas of present-day Karnataka and the fertile areas north of the Kaveri delta in present-day Tamil Nadu. By the 13th century, they governed most of Karnataka, minor parts of Tamil Nadu and parts of western Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in the Deccan Plateau.

The Hoysala era was an important period in the development of art, architecture, and religion in South India. The empire is remembered today primarily for Hoysala architecture. Over a hundred surviving temples are scattered across Karnataka. The Hoysala Rulers who succeeded the later Chalukyas and ruled over the Mysore Plateau in the 12th and 13th centuries A.D. were also lovers of art. They evolved a new style of architecture. The most notable temples of this period are those constructed in Belur, Halebid and Somnathpur. These temples are star-shaped. They are built on a high star-shaped base which is richly carved. The shikharas though pyramidal are low unlike those of other temples. The Somnathpur temple was built by Vinaditya Ballal in about 1043 A.D. and is the earliest of this type. The temple though small was exquisitely carved with three pyramidal vimanas surmounting the three shrines. The best specimen of Hoysala art is the Hoysaleswara temple at Halebid and the Chenna Kesava temple at Belur. The Hoysaleswara temple is composed of two similar temples side by side on a single five feet high star shaped terrace. Built of grey soap-stone, best suited for fine carving, each of the temples has star shaped vimanas with projections on three sides. The inner arms connect the two temples. The mandapa ceilings and the pillars in the hall are intricately carved. The entire base is covered with running lengths of carved friezes of tigers, elephants, horses, birds and celestial beings—each frieze more beautiful than the other. The ceilings, interior and exterior walls of the temple have beautiful sculptures carved on them.

Hoysala literature is the large body of literature in the Kannada and Sanskrit languages produced by the Hoysala Empire 1025–1343 in what is now southern India

*Key words: Hoysala, Art, Architecture, Literature, Vishnuvardhana, Halebid, Belur*

## Introduction

The Hoysalas ruled a large part of modern day Karnataka and parts of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu from the 10th to the 14th century. Historians consider them to have been natives of the Malnad region in Karnataka but inscriptions also point towards connections with the Yadavas from North India. The Hoysala Empire was founded by King Nripa Kama II who is remembered to having built an alliance with the Western Ganga dynasty. He was succeeded by his son Vinayaditya who was followed by his son and their sons until Veera Ballala I who died childless and was succeeded by his younger brother Vishnuvardhana Raya. In the history of Hoysalas the name, Vishnuvardhana Raya holds great importance.

It was under King Vishnuvardhana Raya that the kingdom achieved political prominence. Of his many military conquests, he is best known for winning the Gangawadi area from the Cholas in 1116. It was also under his reign that the influence of Sri Ramanujacharya spread in the Karnataka region and Srivaishnavism grew in popularity. Vishnuvardhana Raya himself was originally known as Bittideva and took on this name only after converting from Jainism to Srivaishnavism. A number of Vaishnava temples were built under his patronage while his queen, Shantala Devi who remained a devout Jain, fostered a number of artists. In the late 1100s, King Vishnuvardhana Raya's grandson, Veera Ballala II freed the Hoysalas from the Chalukya subordination and established an independent kingdom. Kannada folklore suggests that he founded the city of Bangalore. He was succeeded by his son; Narasimha II who in turn was succeeded by his son, Vira Someshwara. Civil war broke out under his reign and the kingdom was partitioned into two parts and ruled by his sons, Narasimha III and Ramanatha. Veera Ballala III, the son of Narasimha III is considered the last ruler of the Hoysala dynasty. He reunified the kingdom but after his death at the battle of Madurai in 1343, the kingdom disintegrated and was merged with other empires.

## Objective

This paper attempts to delineate the contribution of Hoysala Empire towards enrichment of Kannada art literature and edifices

## Hoysala literature

Hoysala literature is the large body of literature in the Kannada and Sanskrit languages produced by the Hoysala Empire (1025–1343) in what is now southern India. The empire was established by Nripa Kama II, came into political prominence during the rule of King Vishnuvardhana (1108–1152), and declined gradually after its defeat by the Khalji dynasty invaders in 1311. Kannada literature during this period consisted of writings relating to the socio-religious developments of the Jain and Veerashaiva faiths, and to a lesser extent that of the Vaishnava faith. The earliest well-known brahmin writers in Kannada were from the Hoysala court. While most of the courtly textual production was in Kannada, an important corpus of monastic Vaishnava literature relating to Dvaita (dualistic) philosophy was written by the renowned philosopher Madhvacharya in Sanskrit. Writing Kannada literature in native metres was first popularised by the court poets. These metres were the sangatya, compositions sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument; shatpadi, six-line verses; ragale, lyrical compositions in blank verse; and tripadi, three-line verses. However, Jain writers continued to use the traditional champu, composed of prose and verse. Important literary contributions in Kannada were made not only by court poets but also by noblemen, commanders, ministers, ascetics and saints associated with monasteries.

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As in earlier centuries, Jain authors wrote about tirthankars saints, princes and other personages important to the Jain religion. Jain versions of the Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Bhagavata tales of Hindu god Krishna were also written. According to R. Narasimhacharya, a noted scholar on Kannada literature, more Jain writers wrote in Kannada than in any other Dravidian language during the "Augustan age" of Kannada literature, from the earliest known works to the 12th century. The Veerashaiva writers, devotees of the Hindu god Shiva, wrote about his 25 forms in their expositions of Shaivism. Vaishnava authors wrote treatments of the Hindu epics, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata. Breaking away from the old Jain tradition of using the champu form for writing Kannada literature, Harihara penned poems in the ragale metre in Siva-ganada-ragalegalu 1160. His nephew Raghavanka established the shatpadi tradition by writing a unique version of the story of King Harishchandra in Harishchandra Kavya 1200. Sisumayana introduced the sangatya metre in his Anjanacharita and Tripuradahana 1235. However, some scholars continued to employ Sanskritic genres such as champu Ramachandra Charitapurana, shataka 100 verse compositions, Pampa sataka and ashtaka eight line verse compositions, Mudige ashtaka.

The exact beginnings of the haridasa movement in the Kannada-speaking region have been disputed. Belur Keshavadasa, a noted Harikatha scholar, claimed in his book Karnataka Bhaktavijaya that the movement was inspired by saint Achalananda Dasa of Turvekere in the modern Tumkur district in the 9th century. However, neither the language used in Achalananda Dasa's compositions nor the discovery of a composition with the pen name "Achalanada Vitthala", which mentions the 13th-century philosopher Madhvacharya, lends support to the 9th-century theory. Naraharitirtha 1281, one of

earliest disciples of Madhvacharya, is therefore considered the earliest haridasa to write Vaishnava compositions in Kannada. Secular topics were popular and included treatises on poetry Sringararatnakara and writings on natural sciences Rattasutra, mathematics Vyavaharaganita, fiction Lilavati, grammar Shabdamanidarpana, rhetoric Udayadityalankara and others.

Important contributions were made by some prominent literary families. One Jain family produced several authors, including Mallikarjuna, the noted anthologist 1245; his brother-in-law Janna 1209, the court poet of King Veera Ballala II; Mallikarjuna's son Keshiraja 1260, considered by D. R. Nagaraj, a scholar on literary cultures in history, to be the greatest theorist of Kannada grammar; and Sumanobana, who was in the court of King Narasimha I and was the maternal grandfather of Keshiraja. Harihara 1160 and his nephew Raghavanka 1200, poets who set the trend for using native metres, came from a Shaiva family devotees of the god Shiva.

The support of the Hoysala rulers for the Kannada language was strong, and this is seen even in their epigraphs, often written in polished and poetic language, rather than prose, with illustrations of floral designs in the margins. In addition to the Hoysala patronage, royal support was enjoyed by Kannada poets and writers during this period in the courts of neighbouring kingdoms of the western Deccan. The Western Chalukyas, the Southern Kalachuris, the Seuna Yadavas of Devagiri and the Silharas of Kolhapur are some of the ruling families who enthusiastically used Kannada in inscriptions and promoted its literature.

Writers bilingual in Kannada and Telugu gained popularity which caused interaction between the two languages, a trend that continued into modern times. The Veerashiva canon of the Kannada language was translated or adapted into Telugu from this time period. Palkuriki Somanatha 1195, a devotee of social reformer Basavanna, is the most well-known of these bilingual poets. The Chola chieftain Nannechoda c. 1150 used many Kannada words in his Telugu writings. After the decline of the Hoysala empire, the Vijayanagara empire kings further supported writers in both languages. In 1369, inspired by Palkuriki Somanatha, Bhima Kavi translated the Telugu Basavapurana to Kannada, and King Deva Raya II c. 1425 had Chamarasa's landmark writing Prabhulingalile translated into Telugu and Tamil. Many Veerashaiva writers in the court of the 17th century Kingdom of Mysore were multilingual in Kannada, Telugu and Sanskrit while the Srivaishnava a sect of Vaishnavism Kannada writers of the court were in competition with the Telugu and Sanskrit writers.

Information from contemporary records regarding several writers from this period whose works are considered lost include: Maghanandi probable author of Rama Kathe and guru of Kamalabhava of 1235, Srutakirti guru of Aggala, and author of Raghava Pandaviya and possibly a Jina-stuti, 1170, Sambha Varma mentioned by Nagavarma of 1145, Vira Nandi Chandraprabha Kavyamala, 1175, Dharani Pandita Bijjala raya Charita and Varangana Charita, Amrita Nandi Dhanvantari Nighantu, Vidyanaatha Prataparudriya, Ganeshvara Sahitya Sanjivana, Harabhakta, a Veerashaiva mendicant Vedabhashya, 1300, and Siva Kavi author of Basava Purana in 1330. During the early 12th-century ascendancy of the Hoysalas, the kings of the dynasty entertained imperial ambitions. King Vishnuvardhana wanted to perform Vedic sacrifices befitting an emperor, and surpass his overlords, the Western Chalukyas, in military and architectural achievements. This led to his conversion from Jainism to Vaishnavism. Around the same time, the well-known philosopher Ramanujacharya sought refuge from the Cholas in Hoysala territory and popularised the Sri Vaishnava faith, a sect of Hindu Vaishnavism. Although Jains continued to dominate culturally in what is now the southern Karnataka

region for a while, these social changes would later contribute to the decline of Jain literary output. The growing political clout of the Hoysalas attracted many bards and scholars to their court, who in turn wrote panegyrics on their patrons.

**Nagachandra**, a scholar and the builder of the Mallinatha Jinalaya a Jain temple in honor of the 19th Jain tirthankar, Mallinatha, in Bijapur, Karnataka, wrote Mallinathapurana 1105, an account of the evolution of the soul of the Jain saint. According to some historians, King Veera Ballala I was his patron. Later, he wrote his magnum opus, a Jain version of the Hindu epic Ramayana called Ramachandra Charitapurana or Pampa Ramayana. Written in the traditional champu metre and in the Pauma charia tradition of Vimalasuri, it is the earliest extant version of the epic in the Kannada language. The work contains 16 sections and deviates significantly from the original epic by Valmiki. Nagachandra represents King Ravana, the villain of the Hindu epic, as a tragic hero, who in a moment of weakness commits the sin of abducting Sita wife of the Hindu god Rama but is eventually purified by her devotion to Rama. In a further deviation, Rama's loyal brother Lakshmana instead of Rama kills Ravana in the final battle. Eventually, Rama takes jaina-diksha converts to Digambara monk, becomes an ascetic and attains nirvana enlightenment. Considered a complementary work to the Pampa Bharatha of Adikavi Pampa 941, a Jain version of the epic Mahabharata, the work earned Nagachandra the honorific "Abhinava Pampa" "new Pampa". Only in the Kannada language do Jain versions exist of the Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, in addition to their brahminical version.

**Kanti** 1108, known for her wit and humour, was one of the earliest female poets of the Kannada language and a contemporary of Nagachandra, with whom she indulged in debates and repartees. Rajaditya, a native of either Puvina bage or Raibhag the modern Belgaum district, was in the Hoysala court during the days of King Veera Ballala I and King Vishnuvardhana. He wrote in easy verse on arithmetic and other mathematical topics and is credited with three of the earliest writings on mathematics in the Kannada language: Vyavaharaganita, Kshetraganita and Lilavati. Udayaditya, a Chola prince, authored a piece on rhetoric called Udayadityalankara 1150. It was based on Dandin's Sanskrit Kavyadarsa.

### **Age of Harihara**

Harihara or Harisvara, 1160, who came from a family of karnikas accountants in Hampi, was one of the earliest Veerashaiva writers who was not part of the Vachana poetic tradition. He is considered one of the most influential Kannada poets of the Hoysala era. A non-traditionalist, he has been called "poet of poets" and a "poet for the masses". Kannada poetry changed course because of his efforts, and he was an inspiration for generations of poets to follow. Impressed by his early writings, Kereya Padmarasa, the court poet of King Narasimha I, introduced him to the king, who became Harihara's patron. A master of many metres, he authored the Girijakalyana "Marriage of the mountain born goddess – Parvati" in the Kalidasa tradition, employing the champu style to tell a 10-part story leading to the marriage of the god Shiva and Parvati. According to an anecdote, Harihara was so against eulogising earthly mortals that he struck his protégé Raghavanka for writing about King Harishchandra in the landmark work Harishchandra Kavya c. 1200. Harihara is credited with developing the native ragale metre. The earliest poetic biographer in the Kannada language, he wrote a biography of Basavanna called Basavarajadevara ragale, which gives interesting details about the protagonist while not always conforming to popular beliefs of the time. Ascribed to him is a group of 100 poems called the Nambiyana ragale also called Shivaganada ragale or Saranacharitanamasa – "The holy lake of the lives of the devotees" after the saint Nambiyana. In the sataka metre he wrote the Pampa sataka, and in the ashtaka metre, the Mudige ashtaka in about 1200.

## Hoysala art and architecture

An abundance of figure sculpture covers almost all the Hoysala temples. Soapstone, which allows fine detailing and clarity, also helped in this predilection. This is a return to a more extensive iconographic representation of episodes from popular epics compared to later Western Chalukyan architecture. It must be remembered, however, that in temple architecture these do not merely serve a decorative purpose, but are essential to the integrity and composition of the structure.

A cuboid cell, the garbha griha (sanctum sanctorum) houses a centrally placed murti (enshrined icon) on a pitha (pedestal). The shikhara (superstructure), rises over the garbha griha and together with the sanctum they form the vimana (or mulaprasada) of a temple. A ribbed stone, amalaka, is placed atop the shikhara with a kalash at its finial. An intermediate antarala (vestibule) joins the garbha griha to an expansive pillared mandapa (porch) in front, chiefly facing east (or north). The temple may be approached via entrances with gigantic gopurams (ornate entrance towers) towering over each doorway. In the prakaram (temple courtyard) several minor shrines and outbuildings often abound. The vimanas are either stellate, semi-stellate or orthogonal in plan. The intricately carved banded plinths, a distinguishing characteristic of the Hoysala temples, comprise a series of horizontal courses that run as rectangular strips with narrow recesses between them. Also, the temples themselves are sometimes built on a raised platform or jagati which is used for the purpose of a pradakshinapatha (circumambulation).

**Chennakesava Temple Complex:** This is an ekakuta, i.e., a temple with one shrine. Regrettably, the shikhara has been lost to the ravages of time. The garbha griha houses an enshrined image of Krishna (Chenna means beautiful whereas Kesava is another name of Krishna). The whole temple, built on a grand scale, follows the general pattern of Hoysala architecture. It has an east-west orientation set on a jagati. The hall has 60 bays and a shrine measuring 10 m on either side. Under the eave cornice of mandapa (outdoor ritual hall) there are 38 most wonderfully sculpted figures called salabhanjika or madanika (bracket figures). Their placements and inscriptions reveal these to be later additions (primarily during the reign of Veer Ballala II). To the southern end of this main temple lies Kappechennigaraya, consecrated by the queen of Vishnuvardhan, Shantala, the same year. Beside the main shrine there is a subshrine housing the image of Venugopal. This temple follows the stellate plan but is less ornamental.

The same compound houses another temple named Viranarayan to the west of Chennakesava. It is an ekakuta, Vaishnava temple, probably erected at a later date of the 12th century CE. It is built following the basic pattern of a garbha griha and an antarala opening up to the mandapa, all built on jagati. Interestingly, this temple is relatively austere, lacking in the narrative friezes that are abundant in Chennakesava temple. A relatively minor structure, the Saumyanayaka temple is situated to the southwest of the main temple. Its damaged shikhara was repaired in 1387 CE by a minister under the Vijaynagar King Harihara II.

A stepped pond called Vasudev Tirtha was constructed to the northwest of Chennakesava by Veer Ballala II. It is a consistent feature of any temple in which devotees perform an ablation before entering the mandapa. Many such additions and modifications, both minor and significant, have been carried out well into the reign of later day monarchs of this region.

Halebidu Originally Halebidu was called Dwarasamudra which refers to a large water reservoir that was excavated almost three-quarters of a century before the city being selected as the capital of the Hoysala Empire. Its present name means 'old city', doubtlessly indicating to the fact of its abandonment after being ransacked twice by the invading armies of the sultanates. In this dvikuta (temple with two shrines) Shaiva temple, the two garbha grihas (sanctum sanctorum) are found connected by a mandapa (porch) forming a large open hall. One shrine is dedicated to King Vishnuvardhan and the other to his Queen Shantala, therefore it is called Shantaleshwara. Built in 1121 CE, it was principally constructed under the patronage of wealthy local merchants and aristocrats. There are four entrances to the twin temple with miniature vimanas flanking them on either side. Two adjunct shrines, one for Nandi (bull) and another for Surya (sun) are also built on the same jagati. The exquisite friezes on temple walls eloquently render stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavata Purana. These reliefs preserve one of the finest achievements of Hoysala craftsmen and constitute an exhaustive lesson in the symbology of Hindu art.

## Conclusion

The Hoysala temples were among the last temples of consequence to be built in India. Muslim invasions were fast taking their toll and kings were more concerned about fighting off the invaders than with artistic and architectural endeavors. The merging of the Dravidian and North Indian styles created a temple that is unique, so much so that it is often classified as the Hoysala style. The early experiments were found on the extreme edges of the kingdom, around ancient Dwarasamudra. To add to its distinctiveness, the Hoysala temple in plan composed of numerous cellas or garbha-grihas served by a common mandapa. The plan of each of these cellas was a star. The departure from the accepted square form of the temple is understandable when we analyze the plan and see that it is made up of a grid of rotating squares. The resulting outline thus emerges as a star. The mandapa remained a square, though it was now distinguished by circular columns, the shafts of which had been lathed and thus acquired a number of parallel knife-edges. Hoysala architecture and sculpture, especially ornate and intricate, are best seen at Halebid, Belur, and Somnathpur. The family liberally patronized Kannada and Sanskrit literary artists.

The Hoysala rulers also patronised the fine arts, encouraging literature to flourish in Kannada and Sanskrit. Although Sanskrit literature remained popular during the Hoysala rule, royal patronage of local Kannada scholars increased. According to historian Sheldon Pollock, the Hoysala era saw the complete displacement of Sanskrit, with Kannada dominating as the courtly language. King Vishnuvardhana's coins had the legends "victor at Nolambavadi" (Nolambavadigonda), "victor at Talakad" (Talakadugonda), "chief of the Malepas" (Maleparolganda), "Brave of Malepa" (malapavira) in Hoysala style Kannada script. Fleeing possible persecution from the Chola King (who was a Shaiva), Ramanujacharya sought refuge initially in Tondanur and later moved to Melkote, but this event had no impact on Vaishnava literature in Hoysala lands at that time. Around the same time, the well-known philosopher Ramanujacharya sought refuge from the Cholas in Hoysala territory and popularised the Sri Vaishnava faith, a sect of Hindu Vaishnavism, although Jains continued to dominate culturally in what is now the southern Karnataka region for a while, these social changes would later contribute to the decline of Jain literary output.

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