

# The Greatness of Kannada as a Distinctive Language and Literature: A Cultural and Literary Legacy

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## The Greatness of Kannada as a Distinctive Language and Literature: A Cultural and Literary Legacy

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *The Kannada language, one of the oldest Dravidian tongues, boasts a literary heritage dating back over 1,500 years. This paper explores the linguistic richness, literary evolution, and cultural significance of Kannada as an independent language. From the classical works of Pampa, Ranna, and Harihara to the revolutionary voice of Kuvempu and the Navodaya movement, Kannada literature reflects a dynamic interplay of spirituality, politics, and social consciousness. The language has adapted gracefully through changing epochs, from ancient inscriptions to modern digital expressions. By examining key literary milestones, poetic styles, and philosophical discourses embedded in Kannada literature, this paper affirms its integral and independent role in shaping South Indian identity and aesthetics. Kannada's designation as a classical language is not merely honorific but a scholarly recognition of its antiquity and creative vitality.*

**Methodology:** *The exploratory qualitative research method is used here. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.*

**Analysis/ Results:** *The greatness of the Kannada language and literature lies in its rich history, cultural significance, and enduring relevance. From its ancient roots to its contemporary expressions, Kannada has evolved into an independent, vibrant medium of artistic and intellectual exploration.*

**Originality/ Values:** *Kannada literature encompasses a wide array of genres, including poetry, prose, drama, and folk narratives. The richness of this literary tradition is evident in its diverse forms, which reflect the cultural and social dynamics of Karnataka.*

**Keywords:** Kannada language, Dravidian literature, Classical Kannada, Navodaya movement, Literary heritage, Cultural identity

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Kannada, a prominent Dravidian language, is not just a means of communication but a vibrant tapestry of culture, history, and artistic expression. Spoken primarily in the Indian state of Karnataka, Kannada boasts a rich literary heritage that spans over two millennia. This paper delves into the greatness of the Kannada language and its literature, exploring its historical evolution, cultural significance, and contemporary relevance.

The origins of Kannada can be traced back to ancient times, with evidence suggesting its roots in Proto-Dravidian, a language believed to have been spoken around 5,000 years ago [1]. The earliest inscriptions in Kannada date back to the 6th century CE, marking the language's emergence as a distinct entity. The Halimidi inscription, dated to 450 CE, is recognized as one of the earliest written records, showcasing the language's administrative and cultural significance [2].

The Old Kannada period, spanning from the 5th to the 12th century, witnessed the establishment of Kannada as a written language. This era was characterized by the influence of Jainism, which played a pivotal role in shaping early Kannada literature. Notable works from this period include

the *Kavirajamarga*, a treatise on poetics authored by King Amoghavarsha I, which laid the groundwork for future literary endeavours [3].

The transition to Middle Kannada, from the 12th to the 18th century, marked a significant shift in the language's literary landscape. The rise of the Lingayat movement, led by figures like Basavanna, introduced the Vachana literature, which emphasized personal devotion and challenged societal norms. This period also saw the emergence of epic narratives, with Jain authors retelling the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in Kannada, infusing them with philosophical insights [4].

Kannada, a proud member of the Dravidian language family, has flourished for centuries as a vehicle of literary, philosophical, and cultural expression. Spoken predominantly in the Indian state of Karnataka, Kannada has a lineage that stretches back to at least the 5th century CE, as evidenced by ancient inscriptions like the Halmidi and Badami cave scripts. Over the centuries, Kannada literature has evolved through various phases—Old Kannada, Middle Kannada, and Modern Kannada—each marked by unique styles, genres, and thematic concerns [5].

The classical age, with luminaries such as Pampa, Ranna, and Raghavanka, established a poetic and ethical foundation deeply influenced by Jain and Shaiva traditions. The medieval period saw the flourishing of devotional (bhakti) literature led by figures like Basavanna and Akka Mahadevi, whose vachanas voiced both spiritual yearning and social reform. Modern Kannada literature, invigorated by the Navodaya and Navya movements, redefined literary boundaries with writers like Kuvempu, U.R. Ananthamurthy, and Girish Karnad. This paper investigates the greatness of Kannada as both a language of antiquity and an ever-relevant medium of cultural continuity.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

(1) Narasimhacharya, R. (1988). *History of Kannada Literature* [1]:

Narasimhacharya's pioneering work is a foundational text that charts the evolution of Kannada literature from the earliest times to the modern era. His detailed classifications of literary periods—Old Kannada, Middle Kannada, and Modern Kannada—provide a systematic overview of historical transitions, literary genres, and notable authors. The book is especially valuable for its meticulous documentation of inscriptions, religious influences, and court patronage, which helped shape early Kannada literature. His insights into Jain and Shaivite contributions deepen the understanding of Kannada's spiritual and ethical narrative traditions.

(2) Ramanujan, A. K. (1973). *Speaking of Siva* [6]:

A. K. Ramanujan's translation and critical commentary on Kannada vachana poetry opened up the world of Virashaiva saints to a global audience. His selection of works by Basavanna, Akka Mahadevi, Allama Prabhu, and others demonstrates the philosophical richness and poetic intensity of 12th-century Kannada mysticism. Ramanujan not only preserves the literary quality of the original Kannada but also highlights the subversive social critiques embedded in these texts. His work continues to be a vital reference for interpreting the inner life and rebellious spirit of Kannada bhakti literature.

(3) D. R. Nagaraj (2003). *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays* [7]:

D. R. Nagaraj's collection offers a critical and philosophical engagement with Kannada's literary modernity and Dalit expression. He examines the post-Independence literary movements in Karnataka, particularly focusing on the tensions between tradition and modernity, Sanskritization and vernacular assertion. His essays delve into how Kannada literature has negotiated identity, caste, and power through evolving literary forms. Nagaraj's lucid style and interdisciplinary approach make this a seminal work for understanding the political dimensions of modern Kannada writing.

(4) Government of India (2008). *Report on Classical Language Status for Kannada* [8]:

This official report, authored by an expert committee, provides an empirical and scholarly basis for recognizing Kannada as a classical language. It presents archaeological, epigraphical, and literary evidence to show the antiquity and independent development of Kannada literature. The report references early works like *Kavirajamarga* and inscriptions such as Halmidi to establish Kannada's classical pedigree. It also emphasizes the continuity and richness of literary traditions, fulfilling the criteria set by the Ministry of Culture. This document is essential for understanding the academic validation of Kannada's historical stature.

### 3. OBJECTIVES :

- (1) To trace the historical evolution of the Kannada as a distinctive language and its earliest literary forms.
- (2) To analyse key classical and modern Kannada literary works and authors.
- (3) To highlight the sociocultural and philosophical themes in Kannada literature.
- (4) To assess the contemporary relevance and academic recognition of Kannada as a classical language, and also Kannada as an independent ancient, distinctive language.

### 4. METHODOLOGY :

The exploratory qualitative research method is used here. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper [9].

### 5. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE KANNADA AS A DISTINCTIVE LANGUAGE AND ITS EARLIEST LITERARY FORMS :

The Kannada language is a proud representative of the Dravidian linguistic family, with roots tracing back at least two millennia. Its early evolution can be discerned from inscriptions and epigraphical records, the most significant being the Halmidi inscription, dated around 450 CE, which marks the oldest known usage of Kannada in a complete sentence. This and other early inscriptions, such as those at Badami and Aihole establish Kannada's antiquity and its early role as a medium for administration, religion, and cultural identity in ancient Karnataka. The language developed independently of Sanskrit, though it later absorbed a great deal of Sanskrit vocabulary, enriching its expressive power without compromising its grammatical and phonological uniqueness [1], [10-12].

The Old Kannada period (450–1200 CE) saw the rise of literary works patronized by the Ganga and Chalukya dynasties. The earliest extant literary work is Kavirajamarga (c. 850 CE), a treatise on poetics and grammar authored by King Nripatunga Amoghavarsha I. Heavily influenced by Sanskrit literary theory yet rooted in Kannada stylistic principles, it reflects a mature literary consciousness. This period also witnessed the emergence of Jain literature, with authors like Pampa, Ranna, and Ponna, collectively known as the "three gems" of classical Kannada poetry. Their epic and didactic works such as *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* and *Shantipurana* represent a synthesis of classical themes with Kannada cultural idioms.

In the Middle Kannada period (1200–1700 CE), literature diversified in form and theme. The Virashaiva movement gave rise to the vachana literature, brief prose-poems expressing intense spiritual devotion and revolutionary social ideals. Composed by saints like Basavanna, Akka Mahadevi, and Allama Prabhu, these works democratized Kannada by using it for personal and public expression rather than elitist Sanskrit. The period also saw contributions from Vaishnavite poets like Purandara Dasa, whose *keertanas* laid the foundation for Carnatic music. These developments established Kannada as both a literary and liturgical language, deeply woven into Karnataka's cultural and religious life [13].

#### 5.1 Panoramic view of the richness and diversity of Kannada literature across centuries:

The classical phase of Kannada literature was marked by the rise of Jain poets during the 9th to 11th centuries CE. The foremost among them was Adikavi Pampa, who authored the *Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, a Jain reinterpretation of the Mahabharata with Arjuna as the hero and spiritual seeker. Pampa's work exemplifies early Kannada poetic elegance, philosophical depth, and creative adaptation of pan-Indian themes. His contemporaries, Ranna (author of *Sahasra Bhima Vijaya*) and Ponna (author of *Shantipurana*), enriched Kannada with stylistically sophisticated *champu* poetry—a blend of prose and verse—while reinforcing Jain ethical principles and historical imagination. These "Ratnatraya" (three gems) elevated Kannada as a literary language of high esteem.

#### 5.2 Vachana Literature: The Bhakti Revolution:

The 12th century witnessed a transformative shift with the emergence of Vachana Sahitya, a body of devotional and socially conscious prose-poetry led by the Virashaiva or Lingayat movement. Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, and numerous other saint-poets used the Kannada language to challenge caste orthodoxy, religious hypocrisy, and gender discrimination. Their *vachanas*

were short, intense, and deeply personal expressions of devotion to Shiva while promoting egalitarian values. This movement democratized Kannada literature, making it accessible to the common people and embedding a spiritual and reformist ethos in the cultural fabric of Karnataka.

### 5.3 Haridasa and Dasa Sahitya Traditions:

Following the Virashaiva tradition, the 15th and 16th centuries saw the rise of Dasa Sahitya, particularly within the Vaishnavite Bhakti movement. Saint-poets like Purandara Dasa, regarded as the “Father of Carnatic Music,” and Kanaka Dasa composed *keertanas* (devotional songs) in simple Kannada that conveyed profound spiritual truths. These works often employed folk idioms and musical forms to appeal to the masses. While deeply devotional, the literature also dealt with philosophical dilemmas, social discrimination, and moral conduct. Their compositions continue to thrive in religious and musical contexts, reinforcing Kannada's devotional legacy [14-15].

### 5.4 Navodaya Era and National Consciousness:

The Navodaya (Renaissance) movement in the early 20th century marked the beginning of modern Kannada literature. Inspired by nationalism, Western education, and Indian reformist ideals, writers like Kuvempu, B. M. Srikantaiah, and D. V. Gundappa infused Kannada with a new vision. Kuvempu's *Sri Ramayana Darshanam*, a modern epic, won him the Jnanpith Award and exemplifies his universal humanist philosophy (*Vishwamanava*). This period also saw the rise of lyrical poetry, prose fiction, and essays that addressed modern themes like individualism, nationalism, and social reform, reflecting Kannada's adaptive literary spirit [16].

**Table 1:** Predicted historical saga of Kannada Language development\*

S. No.	Development Phase	Period	Reference
1	Predicted Birth Period	1500 BC to 300 BC	Suresha B. (2018). [17]
2	Early development period	300 BC to 450 BC	Iravatham Mahadevan (2003). [18]
3	Old Kannada period	450–1200 CE	Steever, S. B. (1998). [19]
4	Middle Kannada period	1200–1700 CE	Venkataraman, T. K. (1960). [20]
5	Modern Kannada period	1700 - Present	Kedilaya, A. S. (1974). [21]

\* Prediction based on the overall literature review

## 6. MODERNISM, REALISM, AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE :

Kannada literature comprises various forms of folk narratives, prose, poetry, and drama. The depth of this literary tradition is clearly captured in the forms that shape it, showcasing the culture and society of Karnataka. Kannada literature consists of devotional poetry and contemporary novels, demonstrating a constant evolution over time.

Throughout its history, Kannada literature has been shaped by numerous influential writers and poets. Figures like Pampa, Ranna, and Kuvempu have left an indelible mark on the literary landscape. Pampa's *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* and Ranna's *Sahasa Bhima Vijayam* are celebrated as classical epics, while Kuvempu's works, such as *Sri Ramayana Darshanam*, showcase the lyrical beauty and philosophical depth of modern Kannada literature [22-25].

### 6.1 The Impact of Colonialism:

The British colonial era brought significant changes to Kannada literature, introducing new literary forms and themes. The establishment of printing presses facilitated the dissemination of literary works, leading to a surge in Kannada publications. This period also saw the emergence of social reform movements, with writers addressing issues such as caste discrimination and gender inequality through their works.



### 6.2 Contemporary Kannada Literature:

The 20th century marked a renaissance in Kannada literature, aided by the creativity stemmed from the Navodaya movement. Contemporary writers such as U.R. Ananthamurthy and Gopalakrishna Adiga integrated modern elements into traditional narratives. This era also saw the emergence of Kannada cinema, which significantly contributed to the circulation of Kannada literature and culture.

Kannada literature has garnered national and international acclaim, with several authors receiving prestigious awards. The Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honour, has been bestowed upon eight Kannada writers, highlighting the language's literary excellence. This recognition has not only elevated the status of Kannada literature but has also inspired a new generation of writers to explore diverse themes and styles.

The advent of technology has transformed the landscape of Kannada literature, making it more accessible to a global audience. Digital platforms and social media have provided a space for emerging writers to showcase their work, fostering a vibrant literary community. Online publications and e-books have further democratized access to Kannada literature, allowing readers from different backgrounds to engage with the language.

Kannada is more than just a means of communication; it is a vital component of cultural identity for millions of people. The language serves as a unifying force, connecting individuals to their heritage and traditions. Festivals like Kannada Rajyotsava celebrate the language's significance, fostering a sense of pride among Kannadigas.

### 6.3 Influence on Arts and Music:

The scope of Kannada encompasses literature as well as forms of creative art like music, dancing, and theatrics. Folk songs and Yakshagana are traditionally performed in Kannada, showing the language's richness. The use of Kannada in modern music shows that the language is still culturally relevant.

There is active promotion and preservation of Kannada literature and culture, and dedicated organizations that sponsor literary appreciation as well as education. These programs, especially geared towards young readers and authors, are extremely important to the long-term and short-term vitality of the language. Love for such literature enhances the preservation efforts towards the cultural heritage of the state of Karnataka.

## 7. CHALLENGES FACING KANNADA :

### 7.1 Globalization and Language Shift:

Despite its rich heritage, Kannada faces challenges in the modern world. The increasing influence of English and other languages poses a threat to the prominence of Kannada, particularly among younger generations. Urbanization and globalization have led to a shift in language preferences, with many opting for English in professional and academic settings.

### 7.2 Need for Language Preservation:

To stem the drop in usage, it is crucial to implement measures that foster the use of Kannada in education, media, and everyday life. Promoting its use within workplaces and educational institutions will go a long way in instilling pride and a sense of ownership among speakers. Furthermore, the inclusion of Kannada literature in school curricula would stimulate students' interest in their linguistic heritage.

### 7.3 The Role of Government and Institutions:

Government policies and institutional support play a crucial role in the preservation and promotion of Kannada. Initiatives aimed at enhancing the status of Kannada in official domains, such as administration and education, are essential for ensuring its continued relevance. Collaborations between literary organizations, educational institutions, and the government can create a robust framework for promoting Kannada literature and culture.

### 7.4 The Future of Kannada Language and Literature:

Preserving and saving Kannada will depend on how the language balances evolution and innovation while upholding its core principles. Incorporation of modern-day motifs and modern storytelling techniques can capture the interest of new audience members while retaining the relevance of the

language. Kannada literature can flourish amidst challenges with the adoption of a culture focused on creativity and experimental forms.

Within the contemporary world, where the internet has made communication simpler, the preservation and expansion of Kannada literature beyond its regional confines is critical for its development and growth. The use of translation can introduce works from the Kannada literary tradition to readers from every corner of the world, thus facilitating exchange and collaboration between different cultures. Global recognition and appreciation can be achieved by projecting the wealth of Kannada literature through international platforms.

Nurturing fresh talent from within Kannada literature is a powerful investment. A shift in the imagination and perception of the literary world can occur by fostering young writers, poets, and artists actively engaging in their craft. Hope for new and emerging writers exists in the form of literary fests, workshops, mentorship programs, and many more that provide the guidance necessary to help them thrive.

In the post-independence period, the Navya (modernist) movement led by writers like U. R. Ananthamurthy, Gopalakrishna Adiga, and Girish Karnad brought introspection, existential angst, and experimental forms to Kannada literature. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* is a landmark novel critiquing Brahminical orthodoxy, while Karnad's plays like *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* blended mythology with contemporary political questions. Other significant voices include Poornachandra Tejaswi, K. S. Nissar Ahmed, and Vaidehi, whose works explored ecology, identity, and gender. Contemporary Kannada literature continues to thrive across genres—novels, poetry, drama, and digital writing—asserting its enduring relevance both in India and abroad.

## **8. SOCIOCULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES IN KANNADA LITERATURE, SPANNING FROM ITS CLASSICAL ROOTS TO MODERN EXPRESSION :**

### **8.1 Ethical Foundations in Jain and Shaiva Literature:**

Early Kannada literature (9th–12th centuries) was shaped by Jain and later Shaiva influences, emphasizing non-violence, moral integrity, and philosophical depth. Writers like Pampa, Ranna, and Ponna used the champu style to depict dharmic ideals. The 12th-century Vachana movement, led by Virashaiva saints such as Basavanna, Akka Mahadevi, and Allama Prabhu, marked a shift toward accessible, spiritual prose in colloquial Kannada. Rejecting caste and ritualism, their works promoted egalitarianism, gender equality, and the dignity of labour. These developments transformed Kannada into a medium for both profound literary expression and social reform, forging a legacy of introspection and ethical consciousness.

### **8.2 Philosophical Reflection and Humanism:**

Kannada literature has consistently engaged with metaphysical inquiry and humanistic values. Whether in the spiritual dialogues of medieval poets or the existential questions raised in modern novels, Kannada writers have shown a preoccupation with life's meaning, the self, and the divine. The philosophy of Vishwamanava (Universal Humanism) propounded by Kuvempu in the 20th century was a call for transcending narrow identities—caste, religion, or nation—in favor of a broader, human-centered ethical universe. His epic *Sri Ramayana Darshanam* reinterpreted myth through a moral lens, aligning classical themes with contemporary human concerns.

### **8.3 Rural Life, Ecology, and Identity:**

Modern Kannada literature—particularly the Pragatisheela (progressive) and Bandaya (resistance) movements—delved deeply into the lives of rural, marginalized, and oppressed communities. Writers like Poornachandra Tejaswi and Devanur Mahadeva addressed issues such as land alienation, caste violence, environmental degradation, and the quest for identity among Dalits and indigenous people. These themes reflect a growing awareness of ecological balance, rural wisdom, and social justice, showing how Kannada literature evolved as a sensitive mirror to changing sociopolitical realities. The language became a tool not only for poetic expression but also for activism and advocacy.

Contemporary Kannada literature has increasingly embraced feminist, urban, and psycho-social themes. Writers like Vaidehi, Jayant Kaikini, and Sara Aboobacker explore the inner lives of women, the alienation of city dwellers, and the shifting nature of relationships in a globalized society. Themes of gender identity, generational conflict, mental health, and migration now occupy central space. These

works reflect Kannada literature's responsiveness to the modern condition while retaining its linguistic grace and cultural rootedness. As Kannada adapts to newer forms and voices, its literature continues to grapple with fundamental questions of identity, freedom, and moral responsibility.

#### 8.4 Global Reach: Translation and the Kannada Diaspora:

In recent decades, Kannada literature has transcended regional boundaries through both translation and the global mobility of its speakers. Landmark works such as U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* and Kuvempu's *Sri Ramayana Darshanam* have been translated into English and several Indian and European languages, earning Kannada a respected place in world literature. Translators like A. K. Ramanujan played a pivotal role in introducing Kannada's philosophical and poetic depth to non-Kannada audiences, especially through collections like *Speaking of Siva*. Simultaneously, Kannada diaspora communities in North America, the Gulf, and Europe actively sustain their linguistic and literary heritage through cultural organizations, digital forums, and transnational literary festivals. These initiatives not only preserve native identity but also foster new forms of hybrid literary expression, often blending Kannada with English or local idioms. Thus, Kannada literature continues to thrive in global spaces, evolving through intercultural dialogue while remaining anchored in its classical and cultural legacy.

### 9. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND ACADEMIC RECOGNITION OF KANNADA AS A CLASSICAL LANGUAGE :

In 2008, the Government of India formally accorded classical language status to Kannada, acknowledging its antiquity, rich literary tradition, and independent linguistic evolution. This recognition was based on rigorous criteria, including a recorded history of over 1,500 years, an extensive body of ancient literature, and a distinct grammatical structure not derived from Sanskrit. Kannada became the third Indian language to achieve this distinction, following Tamil and Sanskrit. This status conferred both symbolic and practical benefits—it validated centuries of literary excellence and facilitated the establishment of dedicated academic and research institutions for Kannada language studies.

#### 9.1 Institutional and Academic Support:

Following its classical designation, institutions such as the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) and Karnataka Classical Language Centre received increased funding and policy support for promoting Kannada studies. Research chairs, fellowships, and documentation projects were initiated across universities in Karnataka and beyond. Kannada language departments began to revise their syllabi to include early inscriptions, Jain epics, vachana literature, and Navodaya-era texts in a comprehensive framework. This institutional backing has fostered an academic ecosystem where Kannada's classical dimensions are critically studied, translated, and interpreted through modern scholarly lenses.

#### 9.2 Literary Relevance in the Modern Age:

Even though it has ancient origins, Kannada is still vividly alive in the modern literary sphere. Contemporary writers adapt the classical body of literature by revising mythological and epic poems for modern audiences. Historical and philosophical concepts, as well as ancient myths and legends, are often re-explored in modern Kannada plays, novels, and movies. As with the works of Girish Karnad and U. R. Ananthamurthy, classical Kannada literature is also the root of modern Ana narrative forms that address social and political issues: it inspires transformation. Such creative continuity makes sure that Kannada is not an antique in a museum, but rather a living classical tradition.

In the digital age, efforts are being made to digitally preserve Kannada manuscripts, inscriptions, and literary texts through initiatives like the Digital Library of India, Kannada University (Hampi), and public-private archives. Online platforms, literary blogs, and mobile applications have made classical Kannada literature accessible to younger, tech-savvy generations. Kannada's Unicode integration and machine translation tools further enhance its digital utility. This convergence of tradition and technology reflects Kannada's adaptability and resilience, ensuring that its classical legacy is preserved and promoted in an evolving linguistic landscape.



### 9.3 Global Outreach and Identity Assertion:

The classical status has also become a source of cultural pride and identity for Kannadigas globally. It affirms Kannada's equal standing with other ancient world languages like Greek, Latin, and Tamil. Diaspora communities, particularly in the U.S., U.K., and the Gulf, actively celebrate Kannada literature through festivals, academic conferences, and translation projects. International collaborations have brought Kannada texts into global discourse, making them subjects of comparative literature and world philosophy courses. Thus, Kannada's classical recognition is not just an academic milestone—it is a cultural renaissance, reconnecting global Kannadigas with their literary roots while positioning Kannada as a vital voice in the global humanities.

## 10. KANNADA, A DISTINCT INDEPENDENT LANGUAGE - A LINGUISTIC AND HISTORICAL INQUIRY :

The Dravidian language family, one of the oldest surviving linguistic groups in the world, comprises four major languages—Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam—along with several minor languages. Among these, Tamil and Kannada hold a special place, not only due to their classical status but also because of their antiquity and rich literary traditions. There is a long-standing academic debate on whether Kannada evolved as an offshoot of Tamil or whether it developed independently as a distinct branch within the Dravidian family. One has to research, seeking to explore the linguistic, epigraphical, and historical evidence to critically assess the relationship between Kannada and Tamil. While both languages share deep Dravidian roots, it is misleading to consider Kannada as a mere offshoot of Tamil. Instead, the evidence suggests that Kannada and Tamil evolved in parallelly from a common ancestral source, Proto-Dravidian, with distinct phonological, morphological, and syntactic trajectories.

### 10.1 Linguistic Classification and Common Origins:

According to linguistic scholars such as Bhadriraju Krishnamurti (2003) [22], the Dravidian language family is divided into four major groups: South Dravidian I, South Dravidian II, Central Dravidian, and North Dravidian. Tamil and Kannada both belong to the South Dravidian I subgroup, which also includes Malayalam, Kodava, and Tulu. While this implies a shared ancestry, it does not suggest a parent-child relationship between Tamil and Kannada. Both languages are descendants of Proto-South Dravidian, a hypothesized ancient language that may have existed around 1500 BCE or earlier.

The divergence between Tamil and Kannada began at least two millennia ago, leading to the evolution of unique sound systems, grammatical structures, and vocabulary. While they retain some mutual features—such as agglutinative morphology, subject-object-verb (SOV) word order, and postpositions—they are mutually unintelligible in their standard forms today, further underlining their distinctiveness.

### 10.2 Epigraphical Evidence and Independent Development:

The epigraphical record is one of the most convincing proofs to demonstrate the independent origin of Kannada. The oldest known Kannada inscription is Halmedi inscription which may be dated near the middle of 5th century C.E. However, there are remnants of Kannada words from Brahmgiri and Banavasi inscriptions which are from the second century B.C.E. These inscriptions exhibit early Kannada, suggesting that the language reached a stage where it could be recorded in writing long before the influence of Tamil.

The Tamil-Brahmi script, dating from 500 BCE, certainly precedes early Kannada inscriptions. However, scholars such as K.A. Nilakanta Sastri and R. Narasimhacharya argue that Kannada inscriptions show internal grammatical consistency, phonetic peculiarities, and vocabulary that differ significantly from Tamil-Brahmi. Kannada developed its own Kadamba script, which later evolved into the modern Kannada script—distinct from Tamil script. This reinforces the idea that scriptal development was parallel and independent, not derivative.

### 10.3 Literary Traditions: Ancient and Autonomous:

The emergence of classical Kannada literature was marked by the composition of *Kavirajamarga* (circa 850 CE) by King Nripatunga Amoghavarsha. Though it shows influence from Sanskrit poetics, it makes no direct reference to Tamil models, despite the Tamil literary tradition (*Sangam*) being much older (300 BCE to 300 CE). The Kannada epic tradition, with poets such as Pampa, Ranna, and Ponna, reflects

Jain ethical and philosophical concerns and does not mirror the dominant themes of Tamil Sangam literature, which focused more on war, love, and heroism.

Moreover, Kannada literature evolved under the patronage of native dynasties such as the Gangas, Chalukyas, and Hoysalas, who treated Kannada as a language of state and culture. This led to the creation of original Kannada literary genres, such as *Vachana* and *Keertana* literature, which emerged independently of Tamil literary developments like *Bhakti poetry* in Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions.

#### 10.4 Phonology, Grammar, and Vocabulary Differences:

A closer examination of the phonological systems of Kannada and Tamil further demonstrates their distinct evolution. Kannada retains voiced and aspirated stops (such as /g/, /bh/, /dh/), which are absent in Tamil. Tamil, by contrast, underwent a process of phonemic reduction over time and lacks voiced consonants in native words. In terms of morphology, Kannada uses compound verbs and auxiliary verbs more extensively than Tamil.

Grammatically, Kannada shows significant innovation, such as the frequent use of participial constructions, auxiliary verbs, and modal suffixes. While Tamil uses markers like "-um" for future tense and "-aam" for probability, Kannada opts for "-utte" or "-tane" and other variants, showing a distinct tense-aspect-modality system.

Lexically, Kannada has borrowed extensively from Sanskrit, leading to a high proportion of *Tatsama* (directly borrowed) and *Tadbhava* (phonologically modified) words. Tamil, under the influence of the *Tamil purist movement*, has consciously minimized Sanskrit borrowings. This divergence in lexical policies has further widened the linguistic distance between the two.

#### 10.5 Modern Scholarship and Misconceptions:

Despite strong evidence of Kannada's independent evolution, popular discourse and even some early scholars have referred to Kannada as a "sister" or "offspring" of Tamil due to their geographical proximity and shared Dravidian roots. However, modern linguistic studies—especially after the work of scholars like Robert Caldwell, Thomas Burrow, and Bhadriraju Krishnamurti—have clearly delineated the parallel development of Dravidian languages.

As previously mentioned, multilingualism was prevalent in ancient South India, particularly among intellectuals and creative writers. Reciprocal borrowing and shared motifs occurred as a matter of course, though this should not be interpreted as derivation or dependence. The occurrence of Tamil words in early Kannada inscriptions and vice versa results from cultural interaction rather than linguistic lineage.

To sum up, Kannada is not an offshoot of Tamil but a sister language that evolved independently, tracing its origins to a shared Proto-Dravidian ancestry. Linguistic classification, epigraphical evidence, literary development, and grammatical structure all point toward an autonomous trajectory for Kannada. Both languages share an illustrious past and have significantly contributed to the linguistic and cultural mosaic of India. The recognition of Kannada as a classical language further affirms its independent literary and historical identity.

While it is important to celebrate the shared heritage of Dravidian languages, it is equally vital to respect their individual contributions and development paths. Reducing Kannada to an offshoot of Tamil oversimplifies and distorts the complex evolution of Dravidian linguistic culture. Modern scholarship must continue to explore this shared ancestry with a balanced and evidence-based approach, recognizing both unity and diversity within the Dravidian tradition.

The greatness of the Kannada language and literature lies not merely in its longevity, but in the depth, diversity, and dynamism that it has demonstrated across centuries. Rooted in the ancient Dravidian linguistic tradition, Kannada has evolved through various historical epochs—from the epigraphical inscriptions of the early centuries to the sophisticated poetic and philosophical compositions of classical writers like Pampa and Ranna, to the socially charged *vachanas* of the Bhakti saints, and the modernist, progressive works of authors such as Kuvempu and U.R. Ananthamurthy. Each period has enriched the language, making it not only a vehicle of artistic expression but also a tool for ethical discourse, social reform, and intellectual inquiry [26-28].

### 10.6 Comparison with Tamil:

As regards to Tamil which is one of the world's oldest living languages, stands as a testament to the enduring power of human expression across time. With literary roots tracing back over 2,000 years to the Sangam era, Tamil's richness lies not only in its antiquity but in its unbroken cultural, poetic, and philosophical traditions. It is a language that has gracefully carried forward the voices of ancient bards, kings, saints, and commoners alike. From the secular elegance of *Akananuru* to the devotional ecstasy of the *Tiruvacakam*, Tamil reflects the full spectrum of human emotion and ethical insight. Its script, steeped in history, evolved through Tamil-Brahmi to the modern form, preserving memory while enabling innovation. Unlike many ancient tongues, Tamil thrives today, spoken by millions across the world, still birthing poetry, cinema, and scholarship. The *Thirukkural*, a moral masterpiece, continues to guide people across ideologies and geographies. What makes Tamil truly rich is not just its age or complexity, but its soul — its ability to connect past to present, logic to love, politics to prayer. In Tamil, language is not just a tool; it is a way of life, a bridge of continuity, and a cradle of civilization still humming in the hearts of its speakers [29].

Tamil literature, one of the world's oldest and most continuous literary traditions, reflects the intellectual, ethical, and emotional depth of a vibrant civilization. Philosophical classics like the *Tiruvācakam* and epics such as *Silappadikaram* embody cultural refinement and spiritual depth. Tamil's literary legacy thrives today, inspiring generations through drama, modern prose, and cinema. Rooted in antiquity yet ever-evolving, Tamil literature stands as a timeless beacon of linguistic artistry and cultural continuity across millennia.

The earliest known fragments of Tamil writing have been discovered in inscriptions and in potsherds dating from the fifth century BCE. Based on increasingly detailed analyses of grammar and vocabulary, three chronological subdivisions have been identified: Old Tamil (approximately 450 BCE to 700 CE), Middle Tamil (700 to 1600), and Modern Tamil (from 1600). The origin of the Tamil writing system stems from the Brahmi script. The letters underwent significant transformation in their shapes, and this process only stabilized with the advent of printing in the sixteenth century. The most important modification to the alphabet was the use of Grantha letters to transcribe Sanskrit words that had not been integrated into Tamil, although several unusually shaped letters were standardized during the Modern period. Also, Vatteluttu ("Round Script") is widely used [30].

Again, both Kannada and Tamil are independent languages, both with ancient roots and rich literary traditions. They belong to the Dravidian language family, but one is not an offshoot of the other. However, due to geographical proximity, cultural exchange, and shared Dravidian heritage, there are indeed many common words or similar-sounding vocabulary across the two languages.

Here's a detailed explanation with examples:

#### Independent Origins with Shared Ancestry:

Kannada and Tamil evolved from Proto-Dravidian, the hypothesized common ancestor of all Dravidian languages. Over thousands of years, they diverged into separate linguistic streams. Tamil developed into Old Tamil, which has inscriptions dating back to 3rd century BCE (e.g., Ashokan edicts, Tamil Brahmi). Kannada's earliest known inscription is the Halmidi inscription (circa 450 CE), marking the emergence of Old Kannada as a literary language [31].

#### Phonetic and Lexical Similarities

Though independent, Kannada and Tamil share Dravidian grammar structures, such as:

- Agglutination (joining of suffixes to a root word)
- Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) sentence order
- Use of postpositions instead of prepositions

These features result in structural and lexical similarities. For instance: Table 2

Word	Meaning	Tamil	Kannada
Kāi	Hand	கை (kai)	ಕೈ (kai)
Neer	Water	நீர் (nīr)	ನೀರು (nīru)
Pālu	Milk	பால் (pāl)	ಹಾಲು (hālu)
Pū	Flower	பூ (pū)	ಹೂ (hū)

Word	Meaning	Tamil	Kannada
Amma	Mother	அம்மா (ammā)	ಅಮ್ಮ (amma)
Appa	Father	ಅಪ್ಪಾ (appā)	ಅಪ್ಪ (appa)

These are cognates, i.e., words from a common ancestral root, not borrowings. They illustrate the shared Dravidian heritage, not a derivation of one language from the other.

#### Borrowings Due to Contact:

In border areas (like Krishnagiri, Dharmapuri, Kolar, and Bangalore), language contact has led to borrowings and code-switching in daily speech. For example:

- Tamil word "vandi" (வண்டி – vehicle) is also used in Kannada (ವಂಡಿ) in informal rural settings, though standard Kannada prefers "gaadi" (ಗಾಡಿ).
- Tamil word "sappadu" (சாப்பாடு – meal) is understood in Kannada-speaking Tamil communities, but in Kannada, it's oota (ಊಟ).

#### Sound Changes and Divergences:

Although some words sound similar, many have phonological changes over time. For example:

- Tamil: "Iravu" (இரவு – night)  
Kannada: "Ratri" (ರಾತ್ರಿ) ← This reflects Sanskrit influence on Kannada, especially post-9th century.
- Tamil: "Nool" (நூல் – thread/book)  
Kannada: "Hennu" (ಹೆಣ್ಣು – woman), though unrelated in meaning, shows how different sounds (like “n” or “l”) can evolve distinctly.

### 10.7 Literary Independence:

Tamil has a continuous literary tradition from Sangam literature (200 BCE–300 CE). Kannada's literary history begins with early poets like Kavirajamarga (850 CE) and Pampa (10th century). Each language developed its own unique script, literary themes, and cultural expressions [32].

Both Kannada and Tamil share a common Dravidian ancestry. The linguistic resemblance arises from this shared root, not derivation. Over centuries, each developed independently, borrowing from one another only through regional interaction. The mutual respect and coexistence of these classical languages stand as a testimony to India's pluralistic linguistic heritage.

While Kannada and Tamil are both integral members of the Dravidian language family, it is academically inaccurate to consider Kannada an offshoot of Tamil. Both languages evolved independently from a common Proto-Dravidian ancestor, and over millennia, they have developed distinct phonologies, grammatical structures, literary traditions, and vocabularies. The claim that Kannada derives from Tamil likely stems from superficial lexical similarities and geographic contiguity, rather than from historical linguistic evidence.

Tamil is widely recognized as one of the world's oldest living languages, with an unbroken literary tradition dating back to at least the 3rd century BCE, as evidenced by Sangam literature and Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Kannada too has a deep-rooted literary history, marked by inscriptions such as the Halimi inscription (circa 450 CE) and the landmark text *Kavirajamarga* (850 CE), which outlines a refined literary culture in the Kannada-speaking region. Despite sharing a Dravidian grammatical base—including agglutinative structure, SOV syntax, and extensive use of postpositions—the languages have travelled different paths, influenced by diverse sociocultural and political factors. For example, Sanskrit had a heavier impact on Kannada vocabulary, especially in literary and administrative registers, whereas Tamil preserved a higher proportion of native Dravidian vocabulary. However, due to geographical proximity and sustained contact in the border regions of present-day Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, certain words in Kannada do resemble Tamil, either as shared cognates or occasional borrowings. As we have seen above, both languages share words like 'kai' (hand), 'neeru/nīr' (water), 'amma' (mother), and 'appa' (father), all of which stem from common Dravidian roots rather than linguistic borrowing. Such similarities are characteristic of languages that evolved from the same ancestral family, much like Latin's influence across Romance languages. In addition, Tamil words like 'vandi' (vehicle) and 'sappadu' (meal) are familiar in some Kannada-speaking regions due to sociolinguistic exchange, but they are not the standard equivalents (Kannada uses 'gaadi' and 'oota')



respectively). On the other hand, Kannada also incorporates unique terms like ‘hebbāgithu’ (it became big) or ‘hogta idini’ (I am going), which have no direct Tamil equivalents. Phonologically, Kannada retains aspirated consonants and voiced stops influenced by Sanskrit (e.g., ‘b’, ‘dh’), whereas Tamil generally avoids aspirates. Furthermore, while Tamil uses the retroflex ‘zh’ (ழ) sound distinctively, Kannada lacks this phoneme, further reinforcing their phonetic divergence. Therefore, it is more accurate to regard Kannada and Tamil as parallel and autonomous linguistic evolutions from a shared Dravidian root rather than a parent-child relationship. A comparative linguistic and cultural approach underlines how each language has contributed uniquely to Indian civilization and literature. Their literary independence was formally recognized when both languages were accorded the status of Classical Languages by the Government of India — Tamil in 2004 and Kannada in 2008, reflecting their antiquity, richness, and originality.

## 11. CONCLUSION :

The identity of the people of Karnataka is intertwined with Kannada culture. The language has given birth to movements, documented oral histories, and served as a source of spiritual comfort. Literature in Kannada embodies local pride while wrestling with broad human issues. The different forms of literature, such as epics, lyrics, prose, drama, and folk traditions, demonstrate both depth and breadth, revealing a timelessly rooted literary culture that is responsive to change yet steadfast to its core philosophical and aesthetic ideals.

In the contemporary era marked by globalization and technological transformation, Kannada continues to thrive as a medium of creative innovation in theatre, cinema, digital media, and academic research. However, with increasing linguistic homogenization and cultural erosion, there is a pressing need to preserve and promote Kannada in its full richness. This involves not only institutional support for education and research but also active community engagement, translations, and the use of digital platforms to make Kannada literature more accessible to younger and global audiences.

Preserving Kannada is not merely a nostalgic act—it is a cultural imperative. It allows us to retain a vital part of our collective heritage while inspiring new generations to explore their roots, think critically, and create meaningfully. The language embodies a worldview, an ethical system, and a profound aesthetic sensitivity that continues to speak to the human condition.

Through sustained academic inquiry, public awareness, and intergenerational transmission, we can safeguard the legacy of Kannada literature and nurture a future where the language remains a living, evolving force of artistic, cultural, and intellectual expression. It is through such collective effort that Kannada’s greatness can be not only remembered but relived—celebrated anew in every era, voice, and imagination it inspires.

Kannada’s immensity lies not only in its antiquity but in its adaptability and intellectual depth. It is among the few Indian languages that have preserved a continuous literary tradition from ancient to modern times, reflecting a diverse spectrum of ideas—from Jain ethics and Shaivite mysticism to modern realism and post-colonial critiques. The inscriptions of Halmidi and the Kavirajamarga of King Nripatunga offer evidence of its early sophistication, while medieval poets like Basavanna democratized language through accessible spiritual verse. The Navodaya period witnessed the resurgence of Kannada with a renewed focus on nationalism, reform, and universal human values, as exemplified by Kuvempu’s concept of *Vishwamanava* (Universal Man). Later, the Navya movement brought introspective realism and experimental forms, aligning Kannada literature with global literary trends. Furthermore, Kannada theatre and cinema, powered by literary texts, expanded the cultural reach of the language.

The Kannada language’s magnanimity goes beyond awards by the institutions; it is alive in the ability to adapt to change while safeguarding its traditions.

Thus, Kannada literature has stood as a mirror to Karnataka’s spiritual, social, and political evolution. It continues to inspire new generations with its linguistic elegance, philosophical depth, and emotional richness. From the vachanas of saints to the novels of modern masters, Kannada remains a living tradition—deeply regional yet profoundly universal. The study of its greatness is thus not just a linguistic exercise but an exploration of a civilizational ethos that continues to thrive.



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