

The many states of Karnataka

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There is not one Karnataka, but many contained within the one we know. And that is what we should be celebrating as this Rajotasava month comes to an end.



Representative image of Karnataka flag.

Credit: PTI Photo

Juhi Tyagi and Dileep Aathresh

The recent elections in Karnataka brought forth several contestations, notably the ongoing debate surrounding the legacy of Tipu Sultan. The idea of celebrating Tipu Sultan is anathema to those who point to his actions of religious persecution and forcible conversion while turning a blind eye to his immense contributions. These narratives, along with other similar stories, contribute to shaping an image of Karnataka as an insular, homogeneous state bound by fealty to a single language and culture. Exploring the diverse facets of present-day Karnataka, we emphasise the importance of embracing the state's rich history and the need to persevere with the idea of a varied and beautiful Karnataka.

The historically rich Badami-Bijapur stretch in the north of the state exemplifies the syncretic traditions within Karnataka. We made a trip to the region in the scorching summer that defines this region and its ecology. Closer to Maharashtra, in Badami, one can hear a distinct

dialect of Kannada with strong influences of Marathi and Dakkani. The streets are dotted with khanavalis offering the famous spicy north Karnataka meals more akin to Maharashtra than Mysore Karnataka. Amidst the massive twin sandstone cliffs lie the Badami caves and temples, a world heritage site built by the Chalukyas during the 6th–7th centuries. Between the caves, temples, the man-made lake, and the fort are the distinct rows of tiny houses and a mosque. There is nothing homogeneous about this region.

The East Chalukyas were one of the prominent dynasties that ruled the Deccan region. Badami was their seat of power. They reached their zenith under Pullakeshi-2. Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal came to be seen as the cradles of Hindu temple architecture. Yet their vicious cycle of war with the Pallavas from the Tamil region, also known for their magnificent temple architecture, ensured destruction. The Pallava king Narasimhavarma is said to have looted enormous wealth from Badami, routing it into building the grand temples of Kanchi and Mahabalipuram. Giving these facts a convenient miss, the current crop of tourist guides focuses on narratives that reflect the fissures of the present times: Muslim invaders and the resulting destruction, despite historical sources suggesting Tipu Sultan contributed to renovating Badami.

Traversing further north from Badami, we reach Bijapur, now known as Vijayapura, whose erstwhile Bahmani rulers face a similar fate of historical reduction. Their role in the defeat of the Vijayanagara empire and the sacking of Hampi gains precedence over their other contributions.

The Adil Shahis, with their architectural gems like the Gol Gumbaz, brought in a distinct influence of Sufism and Dakkhani architecture to a land that had seen the ebbs and flows of different religions, from Jainism to Veerashaivism. Bijapur was also witness to the radical Bhakti movement led by the likes of Shri Basavanna and Akkamahadevi. This egalitarian movement, which registered a strong dissent against the prevalent Jain and Brahmanical hegemony and stifling caste structure of those days, also gave birth to the Lingayat community. The community now wields enormous political and economic power in this region, reflected in the shiny new malls, hospitals, and educational institutions they own. Alongside are active Muslim youth and social welfare groups, whose offices adorn portraits of Ambedkar and Gandhi, with Muslims constituting around 30% of the population of Vijayapur town. The region has evolved to integrate, like earlier, many emerging ideas and groups.

The state's multitudinous syncretic practices are visible across Karnataka, from the coast influenced by Christianity and Islam to the urban landscape of Bengaluru, which hosts the Karaga festival. This diversity is also evident in the fields of literature and cricket. The state has the second-highest number of Jnanpith Award winners. Some of the award recipients, like Masti Venkatesha Iyengar, Da. Ra. Bendre, or Girish Karnad, were not native Kannada speakers, with some even being English professors. The same diversity is reflected in state cricket. From the likes of Brijesh Patel and Rahul Dravid to the present crop of K L Rahul,

Mayank Agarwal, and Manish Pandey, the dressing room has had a smattering of cricketers who are not native Kannada speakers. This diversity has not stymied progress, nor have there been reports of language-based parochialism. Several centuries of shifting boundaries and people from diverse backgrounds and cultures are what make Karnataka the vibrant confluence that it is today. There is not one Karnataka, but many contained within the one we know. And that is what we should be celebrating as this Rajotasava month comes to an end.

(Juhi Tyagi teaches at Azim Premji University. Dileep Aathresh is a management consultant and history buff)

(Published 29 November 2023, 02:06 IST)