Prehistoric Period 3
Early Historic Period 5
Satavahana Dynasty 6
Kadamba Dynasty 9
Ganga Dynasty 10
Chalukyas of Badami 13
Rashtrakuta Dynasty 15
Western Chalukyas of Kalyani 17
Hoysala Dynasty 18
Vijayanagara Empire (Early Roots) 21
Influence of Jainism 22
Spread of Buddhism 25
Early Hindu Temples in Karnataka 26
Cultural Developments 29
Inscriptions and Epigraphy 31
Ancient Trade and Economy 33
Social Structure 35
Geopolitical Importance 38
Decline of Ancient Karnataka Kingdoms 39
Archaeological Sites in Karnataka 42
Transition from Ancient to Medieval Karnataka 44
Chalukyas of Kalyani 46
Kalachuris of Kalyani 48
Hoysalas of Dwarasamudra 50
Vijayanagara Empire 52
Bahmani Sultanate 55
Adil Shahi Dynasty of Bijapur 57
Wodeyars of Mysore 59
Religious Developments 61
Art and Architecture in Medieval Karnataka 64
Literature in Medieval Karnataka 65
Economic Structure 68
Urbanization 69
Military Organization 72

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Administrative Systems....73
Social Structure....76
Impact of Foreign Invaders....77
Decline of Vijayanagara Empire....81
Rise of Regional Kingdoms....83
Maratha Influence in Karnataka....84
Archaeological Sites and Monuments....87
Introduction to Modern Karnataka....89
Early European Contacts....91
Mysore Under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan....92
Wodeyars of Mysore Post-Tipu Sultan....95
British Administration in Karnataka....97
Social Reforms in Karnataka....99
Economic Changes Under British Rule....101
Freedom Movement in Karnataka....104
Unification of Karnataka....105
Impact of World Wars....108
Mysore Economic Conference....110
Industrialization in Karnataka....112
Development of Education....114
Cultural Renaissance in Karnataka....117
Formation of Karnataka State....119
Movements for Social Justice....122
Role of Karnataka in Post-Independence Development....123
Political Developments....126
Role of Press and Media....128
Key Historical Events in Modern Karnataka....130
Tribal Movements and Agrarian Struggles....131
Integration of Hyderabad-Karnataka Region....134
Modern Architecture and Urbanization....136
Environmental Movements in Karnataka....139
Contribution to Indian Cinema....140

Ancient History of Karnataka

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Prehistoric Period

The prehistoric period of Karnataka is a fascinating chapter in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It provides insights into the evolution of human society, culture, and technology before the advent of recorded history. Karnataka, with its diverse landscape of hills, plateaus, and rivers, has been a fertile ground for prehistoric studies. This article delves into two prominent aspects of Karnataka's prehistoric period: the **Stone Age** and the **Megalithic Culture**.

Stone Age in Karnataka

The Stone Age in Karnataka marks the earliest phase of human activity in the region, characterized by the use of stone tools and implements. Archaeological evidence suggests that Karnataka was home to various stages of the Stone Age: the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods.

1. Paleolithic Period

- **Timeframe**: Approximately 2.5 million years ago to 10,000 BCE.
- **Key Features**:
  - Early humans were primarily hunter-gatherers.
  - Tools were made of stone, mostly crude and unpolished, including hand axes, cleavers, and flakes.
- **Sites in Karnataka**:
  - **Hunsgi and Baichbal Valleys (Raichur District)**: These sites have yielded a large number of Lower Paleolithic tools, including hand axes and cleavers made of quartzite.
  - **Shorapur Doab**: Evidence of stone tools and early habitation.

2. Mesolithic Period

- **Timeframe**: Approximately 10,000 BCE to 4000 BCE.
- **Key Features**:
  - Transition from hunting to semi-nomadic lifestyles.
  - Tools were more refined and smaller (microliths), often attached to wooden or bone shafts to create composite tools.
- **Sites in Karnataka**:
  - **Sanganakallu (Ballari District)**: Known for its Mesolithic rock shelters and tools.
  - **Kappagallu Hills**: Features petroglyphs and microlithic tools indicating early human settlements.

3. Neolithic Period

- **Timeframe**: Approximately 4000 BCE to 1500 BCE.
- **Key Features**:
  - Introduction of agriculture and domestication of animals.

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    - Tools became polished and more specialized, including axes, chisels, and grinding stones.
    - Construction of settlements with mud houses and evidence of early social organization.
- **Sites in Karnataka**:
    - **Sanganakallu**: Known as one of the largest Neolithic settlements in South India.
    - **Brahmagiri (Chitradurga District)**: Evidence of early farming and animal husbandry.
    - **Tekkalakota (Ballari District)**: Yields remains of polished stone tools and early agricultural practices.

Megalithic Culture in Karnataka

The Megalithic period succeeded the Neolithic and is characterized by the construction of large stone monuments (megaliths), often serving as burial sites or commemorative structures.

1. Timeframe

- Approximately 1500 BCE to 500 BCE.

2. Characteristics of Megalithic Culture

- **Burial Practices**: Megalithic sites are known for their unique burial practices, often involving stone structures such as dolmens, cairns, and stone circles.
- **Use of Iron**: Introduction and extensive use of iron tools and weapons marked technological advancements.
- **Ceramics and Pottery**: Black and red ware pottery, often found in burial sites, reflects the artistic and utilitarian aspects of the culture.
- **Community Life**: Evidence suggests the presence of clans or tribal communities with shared cultural practices.

3. Types of Megaliths

- **Dolmens**: Flat stone slabs placed over upright stones, forming a chamber.
- **Cairn Circles**: Stone circles marking burial spots, often surrounded by small stones.
- **Menhirs**: Upright stones erected in memory of significant events or persons.

4. Sites in Karnataka

- **Brahmagiri**: Excavations revealed multiple megalithic burials, iron tools, and pottery. This site also features ashy layers, indicating human activity and rituals.
- **Maski (Raichur District)**: Known for megalithic burials and inscriptions.
- **Halliur**: Evidence of cairn circles and funerary goods.
- **Hirebenkal (Koppal District)**: Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it features over 400 megalithic structures and is one of the largest and best-preserved sites in India.

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5. Artifacts and Cultural Significance

- Iron tools, including sickles, swords, and axes, reflect technological advancements.
- Pottery and beads suggest trade and cultural exchanges.
- Burial goods like ornaments and weapons indicate beliefs in an afterlife.

Integration of Stone Age and Megalithic Cultures

The transition from the Stone Age to the Megalithic period represents a significant shift in human evolution in Karnataka:

- From nomadic lifestyles to settled communities.
- From stone tools to iron implements, signifying technological progress.
- From simple survival to complex cultural and spiritual practices.

This continuity is visible in sites like Sanganakallu and Brahmagiri, where successive layers of habitation reveal the evolution of prehistoric societies.

Early Historic Period

Karnataka's history stretches back millennia, with evidence of human activity dating to the Paleolithic period. However, the Early Historic Period, roughly from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, marks a significant turning point. This era witnessed the rise of powerful empires, increased urbanization, and the spread of new religions and philosophies, leaving a lasting impact on the region's cultural and political landscape. A key player in this period was the Mauryan Empire, whose influence in Karnataka is evidenced by Ashokan inscriptions found across the state.

The Mauryan Empire's Reach into Karnataka

While the heartland of the Mauryan Empire lay in the Gangetic plains, its influence extended far and wide, reaching deep into the southern peninsula, including present-day Karnataka. The extent of Mauryan control over Karnataka is debated, but Ashokan inscriptions and other archaeological evidence suggest a significant presence, particularly in the northern parts of the state.

The Mauryans likely established their authority in Karnataka through a combination of political maneuvering and military strength. They may have forged alliances with local chiefs and rulers, gradually integrating them into the imperial fold. The region's strategic importance, with its access to trade routes and resources like gold and precious stones, would have made it a desirable acquisition for the Mauryans.

Ashokan Inscriptions: Echoes of the Emperor's Reign

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