

# Rashtrakutas: The Grandest Representation in History Political Power of Karnataka

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study the Rashtrakuta period of dominance was a pivotal period in South Indian history. Contributions to politics, administration, religion, and literature. From the eighth through the tenth centuries CE, the Rashtrakuta Dynasty governed areas of South India. Their empire encompassed the whole contemporary state of Karnataka as well as parts of the present Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, and Gujarat at its peak. Many Islamic explorers and writers, particularly Al-Masudi and Ibn Khordadbeh (10th century CE), reported that all other rulers of India at the period prayed to the Rashtrakutas as a greater force and prostrated themselves in respect before them, such was their impact and imprint.

The Rashtrakuta rulers embraced the Dravidian or Pallava style as well, as seen by the renowned Kailash Temple at Ellora, near Aurangabad (Maharashtra). Buddhist, Jaina, Shaiva, and Vaishnava are the four major religions. Twelve of the thirty-four caves are Buddhist, seventeen are Hindu (Vaishnava Shaiva and Shakta), and five are Jaina (on the northern side). To accommodate large gatherings and perform mass prayers, Buddhist architecture required a large Chaitya hall free of columns. Ajanta and Kanheri's Chaitya halls are examples of similar structures. Ellora's Chaitya caves represent a transitional period. The sanctum sanctorum, which houses Buddha's image, is surrounded by massive columns. The Indrasabha and Jagannatha Sabha in four Jaina caves which contain images of Gommat, Shatinatha and Parshvanatha and Mahaveera are as magnificent as other structures which are Brahmanical. Shiva in Tandava dance is in rare atibhanga pose balanced delicately by four hands on eachside. The colossal image of river Ganga is described as last word in grace, dignity and poise. The Trimurti or representation of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara is stupendous. The threefold image is twenty three feet high and nineteen and a half feet broad. "The grandest representation of the pantheist God ever made by the hands of man". Elephanta, according to Sister Nivedita perpetuates the synthesis of Hinduism - "Three-in-one the Unity-in-Trinity". Among Rashtrakuta rulers some had Shiva as their Titular deity, some had Vishnu and Amogavarsha Nrupatunga was a devout Jain. But inscriptions scattered throughout their vast empire bear witness to their munificent grants to Buddhism, Jaina, Shaiva and Vaishnava institutions. Keeping alive the great Indian tradition of religious toleration.

*Key words: Rashtrakutas, administrative, religious, literary contribution , Buddhism, Jaina, Shaiv, Karnataka*

## Introduction

Rashtrakuta (IAST: rāṣṭrakūṭa) (r. 753-982 CE) was a royal Kayasth dynasty ruling large parts of the Indian subcontinent between the sixth and 10th centuries. The earliest known Rashtrakuta inscription is a 7th-century copper plate grant detailing their rule from Manapura, a city in Central or West India. Other ruling Rashtrakuta clans from the same period mentioned in inscriptions were the kings of Achalapur and the rulers of Kannauj. Several controversies exist regarding the origin of these early Rashtrakutas, their native homeland and their language. Sanskrit literature was highly valued by the Rashtrakutas. The Rashtrakuta court had a large number of academics. During the reign of Krishna III, Trivikrama authored Nalachampu, while Halayudha composed the Kavirahasya. Under the patronage of the Rashtrakutas, Jain literature thrived. Many Jain academics were patronised by Amogavarsha I, who was a Jain. His instructor Jinasena wrote Parsvabhudaya, a versed biography of Parsva. Gunabhadra, another scholar, composed the Adipurana, which tells the tales of numerous Jain saints. The grammar text Amogavritti was written by Sakatayana. Viracharya, a famous mathematician of the time, was the creator of Ganitasaram. The Kannada literature saw its beginning during the period of the Rashtrakutas. Amogavarsha's *Kavirajamarga* was the first poetic work in Kannada language. Pampa was the greatest of the Kannada poets. His famous work was *Vikramasenavijaya*. Ponna was another famous Kannada poet and he wrote *Santipurana*.

There are three groups of rock cut temples in Ellora – Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical. The Kailash Temple is a marvelous piece of rock architecture and sculpture. It was built by the Rashtrakuta King Krishna I in the 8th Century A.D. A complete hillside has been separated from a range of mountains and a huge temple excavated out of it. The main temple is supported on the backs of elephants. The Shikhara is elaborately carved. The temple has an entrance gateway, a Nandi shrine and five other shrines surrounding the courtyard. The main shrine has a large hall with beautifully carved pillars and a pyramidal Dravidian Shikhara. Beautiful sculptures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, episodes from the Epics and Puranas adorn the temple. The Dasavatara gallery showing the ten incarnations of Vishnu is a masterpiece of architecture. There are a number of caves excavated from the hill sides around the temple which contain large halls with images of Hindu Gods. Percy Brown says that the Kailash temple is “an illustration of one of those rare occasions when men’s minds, hearts and hands work in unison towards the consummation of a supreme ideal”. The cave temples on the island of Elephanta near Bombay were also built by the Rashtrakuta Rulers. The main cave temple belonging to the brahminical group of cave temples is dedicated to Shiva and is noted for its fine sculpture. The temple has a large mandapa supported on twenty pillars on the periphery. Flights of steps lead to it from the courtyards in front and at the back. The temple is famous for the huge Trimurti depicting the three aspects of the Supreme Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. On the southern side is a smaller cave temple of Durga. Two and a half century of Rashtrakuta rule, witnessed very high achievement in the field of sculpture and architecture. Now after more than a millennium whatever remains, is in dilapidated condition. Even then, Ellora and Elephanta caves provide splendid examples of that era which excelled in carving out huge monuments and monolithic sculptures. In Ellora (in Maharashtra), we have rock-cut cave-temples of all faiths then flourishing in India.

## Objective:

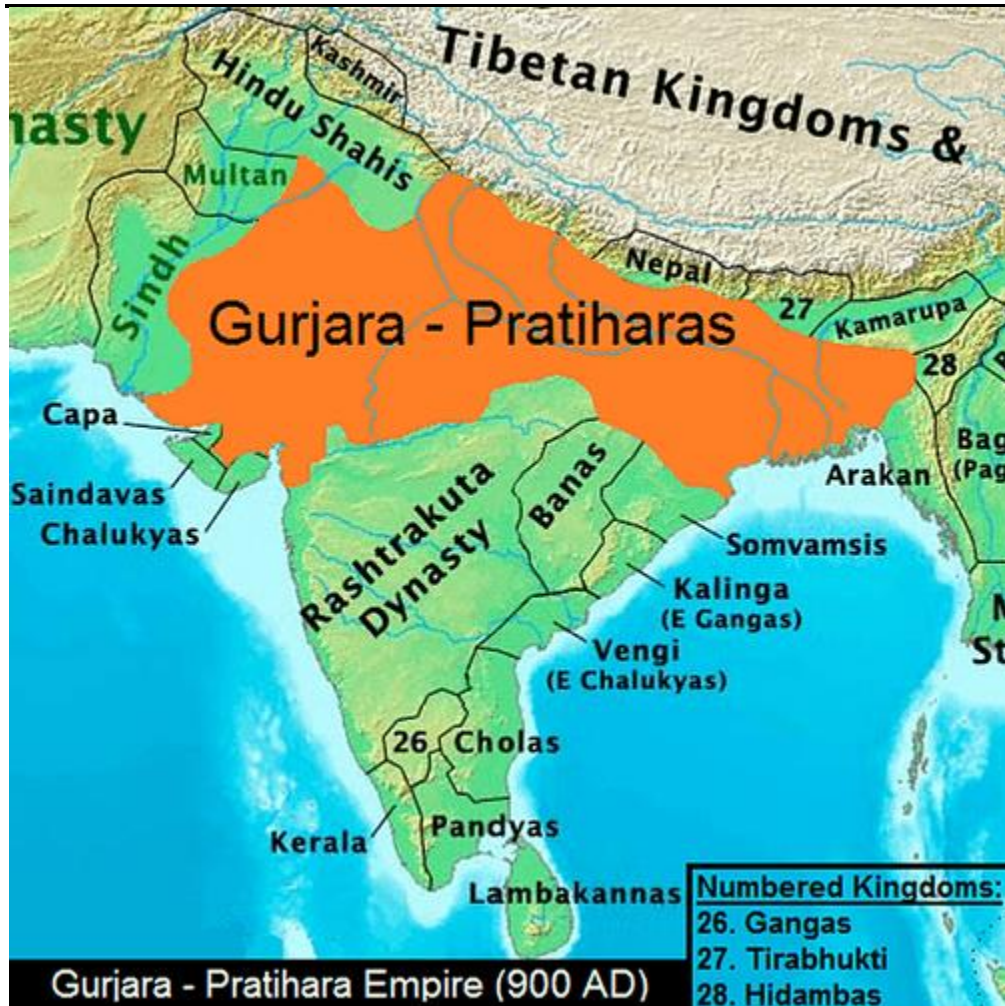
This paper intends to explore: The significance of Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta in what is now town in Karnataka between the eighth and tenth centuries. They made a significant contribution to Karnataka's political, administrative, religious, social, economic, and literary elements.

The name 'Rashtrakuta' in Sanskrit means 'Country' (*Rashtra*) and 'Chieftain' (*Kuta*). This explains their lineage from the time of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka the Great (3rd century BCE) when they were primarily small clan heads in different parts of India. In some of the edicts of Ashoka (in Mansera, Girnar, Dhavali) the word Rathika appears, who may have been the ancestors of the Rashtrakutas. However, though many historians claim that the Rashtrakutas were the earlier Rathikas mentioned in those inscriptions, this theory is not backed up by enough archaeological evidence. Medieval Sanskrit literature reveals fragments of their lineage, which is thought to be from the Mauryan times as small clan heads.

However, their rise began when Dantidurga (also known as Dantivarman, r. until 756 CE), who was a feudatory of the Badami Chalukyas, defeated their King Kirtivarman II in 753 CE. Dantidurga's ascent started from the time when he helped the Chalukyas in their successful war against the incoming Arab army (between 731 and 739 CE). Soon, it became apparent that he was not satisfied in being just a vassal state and started exerting his influence through military aggression. He defeated the kings of Kosala and Kalinga, subdued the Gurjaras of Malwa, defeated other kings of Central India, and made friendship with the Pallava king Nandivarman II Pallavamalla of Kanchi by giving his daughter in marriage, before he made the final assault on the Chalukya king in 753 CE and thus established the Rashtrakuta Empire.

Dantidurga died childless and was succeeded by his uncle Krishna I (r. c. 756 - 773/774 CE). Krishna I gave the final death nail to their erstwhile masters, the Badami Chalukyas, when he routed them in 757 CE to end that dynasty's rule. He expanded his kingdom by invading the Ganga territory and defeating them, by subjugating the Konkan territories and sending his own son to the Eastern Chalukya kingdom of Vengi and accepting their submission without a fight. Krishna I is also culturally very important in the history of India because he was the man behind the construction of the exquisite Kailasa Temple of Ellora (a UNESCO World Heritage site now).

Krishna I was succeeded by his eldest son Govinda II (r. c. 774-780 CE). Govinda II's military adventures include his journey to the Eastern Chalukya kingdom upon instruction of his father and also helping a certain Ganga king in securing the throne from his brother. How he came to his end in life is not known but he was overthrown by his younger brother Dhruva Dharavarsha.



The ascension of Dhruva Dharavarsha (r. 780-793 CE) marks the golden period of the Rashtrakutas. He started his military conquests, first of all, by punishing all the kings who were friendly to his elder brother, and then venturing into the imperial Kannauj and defeating its king. Dhruva then defeated the Gurjara-Pratihara Kingdom of Central India and the Pala Kingdom of Eastern India which was centred around present-day Bengal, and thus with him started the tripartite struggle between the Gurjara-Pratihara Empire, the Rashtrakutas, and the Pala Dynasty to control the main heartland of India. The battle for Kannauj (located in modern-day Uttar Pradesh state) is one of the most important events in the medieval history of India. His other victories include subjugating the Vengi king who could only ensure peace by offering his own daughter in marriage to Dhruva Dharavarsha. He had also successfully moved against the Pallavas of Kanchi (present-day Tamil Nadu) and their immediate neighbours, the Western Ganga Dynasty.

Govinda III (r. 793-814 CE) succeeded his father Dhruva, and though he came to power through a family feud, soon proved to be militarily the most powerful emperor of this dynasty. Though Dhruva had successfully moved into North India in his time, he had not gained many lands. Govinda III rectified that by expanding his kingdom from Kannauj to the Cape Comorin (Kanyakumari now) and from the east of India from Banaras, Bengal etc. to the west of India mainly to the Gujarat territories, and thus on his way defeating numerous kings and rulers like the Gurjara-Pratihara king Nagabhata II, King Dharmapala of the Pala Empire, Pallava Dantivarman, Cholas, Pandyas, Vishnuvardhana IV of Vengi, and several others. Even the King of Ceylon (current-day Sri Lanka) admitted his own subjugation and continued as a feudatory of the Rashtrakutas by paying time to time tributes to them.

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Next in line was the greatest of all the Rashtrakuta kings, Govinda III's son, Amoghavarsha I, also called Nripatunga (c. 814-878 CE). He ascended the throne at a very early age due to the death of his father in 814 CE but could not hold real power as an emperor until 821 CE. He was a scholar king under whom the art, literature, and culture of the kingdom flourished. He himself endorsed and wrote landmark pieces in both the Kannada and Sanskrit languages. He also made Manyakheta (Malkhed in Karnataka now) the centre of the empire by which they are known today as the Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta.

Amoghavarsha I ruled for almost 64 years, and though he faced many wars and battles, by temperament he was a peace-loving ruler. He preferred friendly relations with his feudatories over war and used marriages and other amiable gestures to secure their loyalty. Being a lover of art and scholarship, scientists prospered under his rule and his kingdom was adorned with beautiful and intricate artworks and architecture all around. He also equally patronised Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, but many scholars are of the opinion that personally he probably followed Jainism.

After Amoghavarsha I came various rulers (like Krishna II, Indra III, Amoghavarsha II, Govinda IV, Amoghavarsha III, Krishna III, Khottiga Amoghavarsha, Karka II, and Indra IV) with mixed successes. One of the notable successes was that of King Indra III (r. 915-928 CE), who captured Kannauj in the early 10th century (c. 916 CE). Inscriptions in temples in Tamil Nadu and its surroundings reveal that King Krishna III (r. 939-967 CE) invaded the Chola territory and defeated the Chola army decisively in the 10th century CE.

### **Government, Administration, Society**

The Rashtrakutas divided their kingdom into various provinces, and the provinces were further divided into districts. The kings or emperors of the Rashtrakutas were followed in hierarchy by a Chief Minister who had a cabinet of ministers and different army personnel under him. All the ministers had to undergo military training and be ready for war at any moment. The empire had a mighty army who were always kept ready, especially in their capital city for any incursion or invasion. It was divided into three units; infantry, cavalry, and elephants. It was always diligently trained and kept in proper shape all the time. Feudatory kingdoms would pay tributes, and in case of a special warlike situation or a natural calamity, the administration would also exact some special taxes to meet the expenses, but not at the cost of the happiness and well-being of its subjects. However, the precarious balance that the Rashtrakutas had to maintain between war and well-being, between defence and invasion, between expansion and their administration, ultimately led to their decline.

The subjects of the Rashtrakuta Empire looked up to their emperor or king as the ultimate authority who was expected to look after them and uphold the current social justice, order, and peace. However, for day-to-day matters, there were guilds or co-operatives who would decide on any disputes as per the prevalent custom, and if the case could not be solved, then it was brought to the notice of a higher authority. These guilds generally followed the prevailing rules and regulations of a particular group or caste and would deviate only under special circumstances.

The society was divided into various castes based on profession. The prevailing castes had their own sets of rules, regulations, and customs, which they followed quite diligently. They also followed ancient orthodoxy. However, due to the Rashtrakuta rulers being tolerant towards all religions, society was generally accommodative of adherents of various faiths.

## Push to Kannada Language

Kannada is one of the most important languages in current-day India, and it was the Rashtrakutas who made it popular and a tool of day-to-day communication, though the language had already been in use for a long time. They also patronised Sanskrit which was actually a language of the elite. Amoghavarsha I was instrumental in composing groundbreaking works in both languages, and his *Kavirajamarga* was an important milestone in Kannada poetry. His work in Sanskrit became widely acclaimed and was read in other Asian countries as well. Amoghavarsha I was said to have endorsed Jainism and so a lot of Jain scholars flourished in his court, including the Jain mathematician Mahavirachariya. In Kannada, Adikabi Pampa and Sri Ponna flourished and are now considered to be iconic contributors to the language. The South Indian and the Deccan region was not as fertile as the Ganges valley, but the Malabar coast and other areas still yielded enough agricultural produce to take care of the food supplies. Further, due to the incursion and expansion of the empire to Kannauj and other central and North Indian plains, the food supplies augmented from time to time. As the Kannada states were rich in mineral resources and the coastal areas were controlled by the Rashtrakutas, the export of Indian silk and cotton to Arabia, Persia, and other countries was unlimited. Jewellery and ivory were other important products of the empire while import included Arabian horses. Rulers issued gold and silver coins.

## Art & Architecture

The Rashtrakutas were instrumental in establishing an aesthetic architectural form now known as the Karnata Dravida style. The stunning Kailasa Temple of Ellora (a rock-cut structure) is the epitome of Rashtrakuta architectural achievement, but many of the caves of Ellora and Elephanta (in present-day Maharashtra state) have also been created and renovated under the supervision of the Rashtrakutas. Another UNESCO World Heritage Site, the temples at Pattadakal also came under the sway of the Rashtrakutas after the defeat of the Chalukyas and were subsequently renovated and expanded by the Rashtrakutas. The Jain Narayana Temple is said to be solely created by the Rashtrakuta Dynasty. The art, architecture, and temples that were imaginatively designed during the Rashtrakuta Dynasty were mostly carved from stones and caves. Some of these edifices were once the sacred space for other faiths, such as Buddhism, but were claimed by the Rashtrakuta who transformed them to suit their beliefs. The dominant style of the Rashtrakuta was called the **Dravidian style**. Dravidian architecture is characterized by a pyramidal shape and numerous, elaborate friezes of deities. Other characteristics of Dravidian architecture are:

- *Vimana* which is the central, pyramidal part of the temple in which the symbol or representation of a Hindu deity is kept in a *garbhagriha*, a kind of holy of holies sacred space.
- *Mandapas* which are a type of porch.
- *Gopurams*, also known as "gateway pyramids", are often located outside of the main temples.
- *Chawadis* which are halls with supporting pillars.

Sites that display the stunning artistry of this dynasty includes the following:

- **Kailasantha Temple** is located in the Ellora Caves in the state of Karnataka, Southern Indian. It was built by the Rashtrakutan king Krishna I, in the 8th century. It is considered to be an exemplary expression of the art and architectural style of the Rashtrakuta Dynasty. The temple is a **megalithic structure**, an enormous structure built out of rocks, and is carved from top to bottom out of a single rock. Carved figures of elephants support the main temple structure and there are five shrines. Sculptures can be found throughout the temple complex of Hindu deities as well as narrative scenes from Hindu literature. This temple was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1983.

## Conclusion

The Rashtrakutas' art and architecture may be discovered in Ellora and Elephanta. The Kailasa temple is the most notable temple in Ellora. It was discovered during Krishna I's reign. It's cut out of a gigantic slab of granite that's 200 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 100 feet tall. The main shrine, the entry gateway, an intermediate shrine for Nandi, and the mandapa that surrounds the courtyard are the four components of the temple. The temple is built on a 25-foot-high pedestal. The towering sculptures of elephants and lions on the plinth's central face give the sense that the entire building rests on their backs. It has a three-tiered sikhara or tower, similar to the Mamallapuram rathas' sikhara. A pillared hall with sixteen square pillars can be seen in the temple's interior. With its magnificent sculptures, the Kailasa temple is an architectural masterpiece. The Goddess Durga is seen killing the Buffalo monster in a sculpture. Ravana was attempting to move Mount Kailasa, Siva's home, in another sculpture. The scenes of Ramayana were also depicted on the walls. The Kailasa temple has more Dravidian features in general. The capital Manyakheta was plundered and destroyed under the reign of Khottiga Amoghavarsha, who was conquered and murdered by a Paramara dynasty king in 972 CE, placing a major damage in the dynasty's status. Indra IV, the kingdom's final monarch, committed suicide in 982 CE by following a Jaina rite known as Sallekhana, which involves fasting till death.

The Rashtrakuta Dynasty ended, yet their influence endured. Parts of their realm were conquered by succeeding Chola and other dynasties, but their governing structure and a number of other cultural norms were adopted by future empires.

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