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# A History of Bangalore

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## Introduction

Bangalore, officially known as Bengaluru, is a city whose past and present continually intersect to create a dynamic and multifaceted tapestry. As the capital of Karnataka and a metropolitan giant in southern India, Bangalore's evolution from a prehistoric settlement to the country's "Silicon Valley" stands as one of the most remarkable stories of urban transformation in the modern world. This book aims to unravel that story—a tale not only of kings and conquests, but also of markets and migrations, forests and factories, innovations and identities.

The earliest roots of Bangalore stretch back thousands of years, as evidenced by Stone Age artifacts scattered on its outskirts. Over the centuries, the city has been shaped by waves of settlers, dynasties, colonial powers, reformers, and entrepreneurs. Each chapter in Bangalore's history has left its own imprint, visible in the city's layered archaeological remains, the names of its neighborhoods, and traditions that still define its social fabric. Exploring these diverse strands offers rich insight into how geography, politics, culture, and economy have woven together to shape the evolving metropolis.

At the heart of Bangalore's emergence as a key political and commercial center is its adaptability. The city's terrain—divided between fertile plains and stony highlands—dictated early patterns of settlement, and its enviable climate made it an attractive seat for rulers and governors. From its first mention in ancient Kannada inscriptions to its carefully planned "pete" under Kempe Gowda, and from its days as a royal jagir to the strategic military cantonment established by the British, Bangalore continually reinvented itself in response to the changing tides of history.

Yet, history here is not just the story of rulers and warfare. It is deeply marked by innovation—whether in the irrigation tanks of the medieval town, the horticultural vision of Lal Bagh, or the rapid technological advancements that propelled Bangalore onto the global stage in the late twentieth century. Along the way, the city nurtured diverse cultures and languages, witnessed the growth of arts and science, and welcomed successive waves of migrants who brought with them new skills, traditions, and ambitions.

In the process of modernization and growth, Bangalore's identity has never been static. With each new era, the city has retained elements of its past—temples and forts, festivals and markets—while embracing forward-looking changes. Vibrant street life, a thriving tech industry, contemporary art scenes, and a reputation as the "pub capital" coexist alongside centuries-old pilgrimage sites. Like few other cities, Bangalore captures India's contradictions and promises, balancing tradition with innovation, cosmopolitanism with rootedness.

This book is an invitation to explore the extraordinary history of Bangalore—a history not just of places, but of people. From its ancient settlements and dynastic transformations to colonial rule and the information technology revolution, the chapters that follow chronicle the resilient spirit of a city always in transition. Understanding Bangalore’s past, in all its complexity, is essential not only for appreciating its present and future but also for recognizing how deeply cities can shape—and be shaped by—the tides of human aspiration and endeavor.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Beginnings: Prehistoric Settlements and Early Inhabitants

Long before Bangalore became a bustling metropolis of glass and steel, its story was written in stone and earth, stretching back into the mists of prehistory. The very ground upon which the city stands holds secrets of human habitation dating back thousands of years, offering tantalizing glimpses into the lives of its earliest residents. While the urban landscape of today feels relentlessly modern, beneath the surface lies a deep history rooted in the ancient past of the Deccan Plateau.

Evidence unearthed by archaeologists paints a picture of early human activity in the region as far back as 4000 BCE. Stone Age artifacts – tools crafted from rock and used for hunting, gathering, and processing – have been discovered in areas that are now on the fringes of the sprawling city, in localities like Jalahalli, Sidhapura, and Jadigenahalli. These simple yet vital implements are silent witnesses to the presence of nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples who roamed these lands millennia ago, their existence shaped by the natural rhythms of the environment.

Further finds, including microlithic stone tools dating to around 1000 BCE, were even uncovered near Jalahalli during the unexpected circumstances of World War II, highlighting how layers of history lie hidden beneath more recent developments. These discoveries push back the timeline of human engagement with the Bangalore region significantly, long before any written records or grand dynastic narratives emerged. The people who wielded these tools lived in an age defined by stone, adapting to their surroundings with ingenuity and resilience.

The geography of the Bangalore region played a crucial role in determining where these early inhabitants settled and how they subsisted. Situated on the Deccan Plateau at a considerable elevation, the landscape is marked by a distinct duality. To the east lie the fertile plains, known locally as *maidan* or *bailu*. These areas, with their gentler slopes and richer soil, were more amenable to early forms of irrigation and cultivation, offering the promise of a more settled existence based on agriculture.

In contrast, the western parts of the elevated landscape are characterized by a more rugged terrain – rocky outcrops, thorny scrub jungles, and less fertile ground. This topography would have likely supported different modes of life, perhaps favoring pastoralism, hunting, and gathering over extensive farming. The varied opportunities and challenges presented by these distinct zones influenced where early communities chose to establish themselves, leading to different patterns of land use and settlement across the region.

As the centuries turned into millennia, these early inhabitants gradually transitioned from purely Stone Age existence towards more organized forms of social and political life. While direct evidence remains scarce for much of this distant past, the later appearance of megalithic tombs and burial sites in areas like Koramangala and Chikkajala suggests the development of more complex social structures and ritual practices by the Iron Age, around 1000 BCE. These impressive stone structures, like the dolmens found near Bannerghatta, serve as enduring testaments to the cooperative efforts and beliefs of these ancient communities, even if their precise meanings remain open to interpretation.

The shift towards more settled communities coincided with the emergence of more defined political entities in South India. By the 6th to 9th centuries CE, the Bangalore region saw the rise of local chieftains who held sway over early settlements. These chieftains, while exercising local authority, often owed allegiance to larger ruling powers of the time. In this period, the dominant force in the region was the Ganga dynasty, later known as the Western Gangas to distinguish them from their eastern counterparts.

The Western Gangas ruled over a territory known as Gangavadi, which encompassed significant parts of modern-day Karnataka, including the Bangalore region. Their rule is generally accepted to have begun around 350 CE, with their capital initially located at Kolar before later shifting to Talakadu. While Chapter Two will delve deeper into the specifics of the Ganga dynasty's rule, it is important to recognize their early influence on the political landscape that would eventually give rise to documented settlements in the Bangalore area.

It is from this period that we begin to find the first written records that shed light on the settlements in the region - in the form of inscriptions carved onto stone. These epigraphs are invaluable primary sources, offering tangible links to the past and confirming the existence of communities and events centuries ago. Many of the earliest inscriptions are found in the fertile *maidan* region, where agricultural settlements were more likely to flourish.

One particularly significant inscription is a copper plate found at Mallohalli near Doddaballapur, which mentions Begur (referred to as Bempurishwara or Bempur) and is dated to 517 CE. This inscription provides one of the earliest documented references to a specific location within the broader Bangalore region, indicating the presence of a recorded settlement at Begur over 1500 years ago. It highlights that even in these early centuries, certain areas were established enough to be mentioned in official or religious records.

The practice of carving inscriptions on stone, known as epigraphy, became a vital way to record grants of land, commemorate heroic deeds, or mark the construction of

religious structures. These "inscription stones," or *shilashasanas*, are scattered throughout the Bangalore metropolitan area, providing a rich, albeit fragmented, historical narrative. They offer insights into the language, society, religion, and administration of the time.

Among these numerous stones, one stands out for its particular significance in the history of Bangalore: the inscription found at the Nageshwara Temple in Begur. This stone, a *veera gallu* or hero stone, is dated to 890 CE and contains what is widely accepted as the earliest known written mention of the name "Bengaluru." The inscription, written in Old Kannada, refers to a battle fought at "Bengaluru Kadana" and names the place as "Bengaval-uru."

The term "Bengaval-uru" in Old Kannada is interpreted by historians as meaning "City of Guards." This interpretation suggests that the location held strategic military importance at the time, serving as a place where soldiers or guards were stationed. This historical evidence firmly places a settlement bearing a name akin to modern "Bengaluru" in existence at least by the late 9th century CE, well before later traditions claimed the city's founding.

This epigraphical evidence from Begur also serves to address a popular piece of folklore regarding the origin of the name "Bengaluru." The tale recounts a hungry Hoysala king, said to be Veera Ballala II, who got lost in the forest and was offered a meal of "boiled beans" (*benda kaalu*) by an old woman, leading him to name the place "Benda-Kaal-uru." While a charming story, the 890 CE inscription at Begur provides a much earlier, documented origin for the name, lending greater historical weight to the "City of Guards" interpretation.

Other early inscriptions in the region further underscore the long history of settlement. The Hebbal-Kittayya inscription, dating to 750 CE, is considered one of the oldest intact Kannada inscriptions found within the present-day city limits. This hero stone commemorates a warrior named Kittayya who defended the region against an invasion and mentions the area by an older name, "Perbboḷalnāḍu," believed to be an archaic form of Hebbal. Such inscriptions across various localities like Domlur and Malleshwaram, even in later centuries, refer to these areas by names predating modern layouts, confirming their ancient roots.

These early inscriptions, scattered across the landscape like breadcrumbs of history, provide invaluable insights into the formative centuries of the Bangalore region. They reveal a land already inhabited and organized, with established settlements, local leaders, and strategic considerations, long before it would evolve into the major urban center it is today. The presence of hero stones speaks to a society where valor in defense of one's land and people was highly regarded and formally memorialized.

The period covered by these earliest records falls largely under the influence of the

Western Ganga dynasty, who controlled Gangavadi. While the inscriptions at Begur and Hebbal predate the detailed narratives of later empires like the Cholas and Hoysalas, they confirm that the fundamental building blocks of settled life were already in place. These communities were engaged in agriculture, defended their territories, and were part of a broader political structure, even if the scale was smaller than the urban centers that would emerge much later.

The geographical features that influenced prehistoric life continued to shape the early historical settlements. The fertile *maidan* areas were centers of cultivation and likely denser populations, as evidenced by the concentration of early inscriptions there. The rocky uplands, while perhaps less suited for extensive farming, would have offered strategic advantages and resources that also supported human activity. This interplay between terrain and settlement remained a constant factor in the region's development.

Understanding these ancient beginnings is crucial to appreciating the long and complex history of Bangalore. The city did not appear out of nowhere in the 16th century, as some popular narratives might suggest. Its roots reach deep into the past, connecting it to the earliest human movements in the Deccan and the gradual evolution of settled communities and regional political entities. The Stone Age tools and the early inscriptions are not just historical curiosities; they are the foundational elements of Bangalore's story, the first chapters in a narrative that continues to unfold.

The period before the major imperial powers exerted their dominance was one of regional significance, where local chieftains and the overarching authority of the Gangas set the stage for future developments. The documented existence of settlements like Begur and the first appearance of the name "Bengaluru" in the 9th century CE mark important milestones in this journey from scattered prehistoric camps to more organized human habitation. These early inhabitants, their lives tied to the land and its resources, laid the groundwork for the transformations that would follow.

The picture that emerges from the archaeological findings and the earliest inscriptions is that of a landscape gradually being shaped by human presence and activity over millennia. From the makers of stone tools adapting to their environment to the communities commemorated on hero stones, each era left its mark. This ancient foundation, built on the natural geography and the efforts of early peoples, is the bedrock upon which the later layers of Bangalore's history were built.

These early centuries, though less well-documented than subsequent periods, were vital in establishing the human footprint in the Bangalore region. The development of agriculture, the formation of settled communities, and the emergence of local political structures all contributed to the gradual transformation of the landscape. The

inscriptions provide tangible proof of this evolution, connecting the present-day city to its deep historical roots and the lives of those who called this region home in the distant past.

The name "Bengaluru" itself, first recorded in that crucial 890 CE inscription, carries within it the echoes of this early history – suggesting a place of strategic importance, a "City of Guards." This meaning, tied to the Old Kannada language spoken by the people of the time, offers a glimpse into how the place was perceived and its role within the regional political landscape under the Ganga influence. It is a name that has endured through centuries of change, a direct link to this ancient past.

Thus, Chapter One of Bangalore's history is a story of deep time and gradual emergence. It is about the earliest whispers of human life on the Deccan Plateau, the subtle influence of geography on settlement patterns, and the first documented appearances of communities through the enduring medium of stone inscriptions. It is a testament to the long and continuous human connection to this land, setting the stage for the dynasties and transformations that would follow and eventually lead to the dynamic city we know today.

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