



## DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE AND PLANNING IN KARNATAKA: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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### **Abstract**

*The development of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Karnataka reflects a long and uneven movement towards democratic decentralization. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment gave panchayats constitutional recognition and strengthened the principle of local self-government. Yet the historical experience of Karnataka shows that the effective devolution of functions, funds and functionaries has depended on the political will and administrative choices of successive governments. This article reviews the evolution of local governance in Karnataka from the nineteenth-century local-fund arrangements to the Mysore local boards system, the 1959 legislation, the reforms of 1983 and the framework associated with the 1993 Act. It discusses village panchayats, taluk-level institutions, district-level bodies, Gram Sabhas and reform committees, with attention to their functions, finances and institutional limitations. The article uses a historical-descriptive and analytical approach based on the material provided in the source pages and the works listed in their references. It argues that decentralization requires more than formal legislation: local bodies need clear responsibilities, adequate financial resources, administrative capacity and genuine authority to plan and implement development programmes.*

**Keywords:** *Decentralization, Panchayati Raj, Karnataka, local Self-Government, Gram Sabha, Rural Development, Planning.*

### **Introduction**

Decentralized governance seeks to bring public decision-making closer to the people affected by it. In rural India, Panchayati Raj Institutions are intended to provide a democratic framework through which communities can identify local needs, set development priorities and monitor public programmes. In Karnataka, the institutional roots of local government extend back to the nineteenth century. The arrangements introduced during this period were initially designed largely to support public works and remained under substantial official control. Over time, reforms gradually introduced elected representatives and wider responsibilities. The history of Karnataka's local institutions is not a simple progression from official control to complete self-government. Different legislative frameworks created different tiers and distributed authority unevenly. Financial dependence, unclear divisions of responsibility and administrative dominance repeatedly limited local autonomy. A historical review therefore helps explain both the achievements and continuing challenges of decentralized planning.

### **Objectives and Methodology**

The main objective of this article is to trace the historical development of decentralized governance and planning in Karnataka. It also examines the structure and functions of local bodies under major legislative changes, considers the influence of reform committees, and identifies institutional and financial obstacles to effective local self-government.

The article adopts a historical-descriptive and analytical method. It organizes the information presented in the supplied pages chronologically and thematically, drawing on the legislative milestones, committee reports and references mentioned in that material. Since the present draft is based on a



limited set of pages, further archival research and consultation of the original Acts and committee reports would be required to verify all dates, legal provisions and quantitative details before publication.

### **Early Development of Local Government**

The origins of formal local institutions in Karnataka can be traced to 1862, when a local fund was established for the construction of roads and related public works. By 1874, Local Fund Committees had been constituted in districts. These committees operated under the chairmanship of government officials, particularly the Deputy Commissioner. Their administrative structure left limited room for public participation, and local initiative remained weak.

The Mysore Local Boards Act of 1902 established a three-tier framework involving village panchayats, taluk boards and district boards. Despite this structural development, official control remained strong. Taluk boards were supervised by Sub-Divisional Officers, while Deputy Commissioners served as presidents of district boards. Village panchayats were generally headed by nominated chairpersons.

A significant change came with the Mysore Local Boards and Village Panchayat Act of 1918. Influenced by wider debates on representative government, the Act introduced a greater role for non-official members and provided for the election of presidents in district and taluk boards. Membership increased, and village-level bodies were entrusted with responsibilities connected with rural infrastructure and basic civic amenities. These changes marked an important, though incomplete, step towards representative local administration.

### **The Karnataka Village Panchayats and Local Boards Act, 1959**

The 1959 Act reorganized the local-government framework and followed recommendations associated with the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, which advocated a three-tier system and greater public involvement in rural development. Under this arrangement, village panchayats operated at the village level, Taluk Development Boards (TDBs) at the intermediate level, and District Development Councils (DDCs) at the district level. Village panchayats and TDBs performed executive functions, whereas DDCs mainly had advisory and coordinating roles.

### **Village Panchayats**

Village panchayats were constituted for individual villages or groups of villages, with membership linked to population. The framework included representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and provided for women's membership. Panchayats were responsible for civic services such as sanitation, water supply, local markets and village roads, as well as aspects of agriculture, welfare, minor works and management of common resources. Standing committees were expected to help formulate and implement local programmes.

The Act also provided a limited revenue base. Panchayats could receive a share of land revenue and collect certain taxes, rates and fees. These provisions were intended to support local responsibilities, but the resources available to many panchayats remained insufficient for the scale of their assigned tasks.

### **Taluk Development Boards**

Taluk Development Boards served as an intermediate tier. Their members and office-bearers were drawn from local representatives, while legislators could participate in the manner prescribed by the framework. The Block Development Officer headed the administrative wing and coordinated



development programmes with the assistance of extension officers and village-level workers. TDB functions included school infrastructure, minor irrigation, drinking water, agricultural and industrial promotion, and relief works during scarcity.

The boards had a restricted tax base and depended heavily on government grants and shared revenue. They were therefore not financially independent. Their experience illustrates a recurring problem in decentralized administration: the transfer of responsibilities does not necessarily create meaningful autonomy when local institutions lack reliable sources of income.

### **District Development Councils**

District Development Councils were envisaged as advisory and coordinating bodies. Their membership included representatives of taluk boards, Members of Parliament and state legislators, together with district officials. They reviewed the work and budgets of the TDBs and were expected to offer guidance and coordinate activities. However, the DDCs did not possess independent revenue sources, limiting their ability to act autonomously.

### **Reform Committees and the Search for Decentralization**

In 1962, the Karnataka government appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Kondajji Basappa to examine the organizational and functional problems of village panchayats, TDBs and DDCs. Its recommendations included restructuring district-level institutions, transferring greater powers, strengthening village panchayats and improving coordination among the different tiers. The proposals encountered political and legislative difficulties, illustrating how institutional reform depended on more than administrative design.

The Ashok Mehta Committee, appointed by the Union Government in 1977, renewed national attention to Panchayati Raj. Its 1978 report advocated a two-tier system, with district-level institutions playing a central role and mandal panchayats serving clusters of villages. It emphasized district planning, meaningful devolution and the importance of administrative capacity. Although the recommendations were not implemented uniformly, they influenced subsequent debates and reform initiatives.

### **The 1983 Act and a New Phase of Local Government**

The Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1983, represented a major attempt to strengthen local self-government. It introduced elected district-level Zilla Parishads and mandal panchayats for groups of villages, while providing for Taluk Panchayat Samithis as an intermediate coordinating tier. The framework sought to bring development planning closer to local communities and to broaden participation in elections.

### **Zilla Parishad**

The Zilla Parishad replaced the earlier district-level advisory model with an elected body. Its composition included directly elected members and provisions for representation of women and historically disadvantaged communities. This strengthened the democratic basis of district governance and created a more visible institution for coordinating rural development.

### **Mandal Panchayat**

Mandal panchayats covered clusters of villages with a combined population generally described in the source material as approximately 8,000 to 12,000. They were assigned responsibilities across agriculture, fisheries, forestry, soil conservation, cottage and village industries, construction and



maintenance, drinking water, sanitation, roads, street lighting, health and education. Standing committees supported work in production, amenities and social justice.

Compared with the earlier village panchayat system, mandal panchayats had a broader potential revenue base, including certain local taxes, fees and non-tax receipts. Nevertheless, the source material notes that a substantial share of their income continued to come from grants. This limited their practical financial independence.

### **Taluk Panchayat Samithi and Gram Sabha**

The Taluk Panchayat Samithi was designed as an intermediary institution to assist mandal panchayats through supervision, review and coordination. The Gram Sabha, meanwhile, was conceived as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system: an assembly of registered voters in a village. Its functions included discussing local needs, reviewing panchayat work, identifying beneficiaries for public programmes and preparing village-specific development plans. It also offered a forum for residents to communicate priorities and concerns directly.

### **The 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the 1993 Framework**

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment marked a major constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions. In Karnataka, the 1993 legislative framework sought to consolidate the role of elected local bodies and clarify their institutional standing. It also strengthened the position of elected panchayat heads in relation to the administrative machinery. The principle behind these reforms was that local institutions should be capable of planning and implementing development programmes, rather than functioning merely as subordinate administrative agencies.

The material reviewed here nevertheless identifies persistent gaps between formal authority and day-to-day practice. Responsibilities assigned to different tiers were not always clearly demarcated. In some areas, officials and elected representatives exercised overlapping authority, creating friction over supervision, decision-making and approvals. Functions assigned to village panchayats could also remain under the practical control or review of higher tiers.

### **Post-Reform Functioning: Achievements and Challenges**

Following reforms, panchayats increasingly provided channels for communities to express needs and participate in development planning. Programmes such as Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, the Integrated Rural Development Programme and housing schemes offered opportunities for local institutions to contribute to implementation. Gram Sabha meetings and village-level planning also encouraged a bottom-up approach in at least some programme areas.

However, operational constraints continued to affect effectiveness. The division of powers between elected representatives and administrative officials was often unclear, while overlapping functions among village, taluk and district bodies complicated planning. Local institutions also faced shortages of staff, technical expertise and discretionary funds. The dependence on state transfers reduced their ability to set priorities independently and sustain locally designed projects.

Reform proposals therefore emphasized clearer assignment of functions, stronger elected leadership, and better coordination across tiers, long-term planning and appropriate staffing. They also called for officials to act as facilitators of elected institutions rather than as authorities that displace local decision-making. These measures are essential if decentralization is to become substantive rather than merely statutory.



## Conclusion

The historical evolution of decentralized governance in Karnataka demonstrates a gradual expansion of representative institutions, from local-fund committees and official-led boards to elected panchayats and constitutionally recognized Panchayati Raj Institutions. The 1959 and 1983 Acts, the recommendations of reform committees and the post-73rd Amendment framework each contributed to this process. Yet the record also reveals a persistent gap between institutional design and effective autonomy.

The central lesson is that democratic decentralization requires the genuine transfer of functions, funds and functionaries. Panchayats need predictable revenues, adequate personnel, technical support and clearly defined responsibilities. Gram Sabhas must be enabled to deliberate meaningfully, while coordination among village, taluk and district institutions should avoid duplication and conflict. Ultimately, decentralization is most effective when local bodies have the capacity and authority to identify needs, formulate plans, implement programmes and remain accountable to the communities they serve.

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