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# Historical Background and Evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka: A Study

***Dr. Basavaraj Benakanahalli**
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Davangere University

****Dr. Jyoti k**
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology
Davangere University

**Abstract**
Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represent an important system of democratic decentralization and grassroots governance in rural India. Karnataka has a distinctive place in the evolution of Panchayati Raj because the state undertook important experiments in decentralized local government before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. After the constitutional recognition of PRIs in 1992, Karnataka enacted the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, providing a three-tier system of Gram Panchayats, Taluk Panchayats and Zilla Panchayats. The system was subsequently strengthened through amendments and the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj framework. This study traces the historical development of Panchayati Raj in Karnataka from traditional village institutions and post-Independence local-government reforms to the present system. It examines the major institutional changes, decentralization measures, people's participation, women's representation and emerging approaches to local self-government. The study is based mainly on secondary sources, including legislation, government documents and published research. The study finds that Karnataka's Panchayati Raj system has evolved from traditional village-level institutions into a constitutionally recognized system of democratic local self-government, although issues relating to functional, financial and administrative decentralization continue to influence its effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj, Karnataka, Decentralization, Gram Panchayat, Gram Sabha and Rural Development.

## 1. Introduction

Panchayati Raj Institutions constitute one of the most important institutional mechanisms for promoting democratic decentralization and local self-government in rural India. The basic idea behind Panchayati Raj is that governance should not remain concentrated at the state and central levels but should be brought closer to ordinary citizens. Local communities possess specific knowledge about their economic, social and infrastructural conditions, and therefore their involvement in decision-making can make development planning more responsive to local requirements. Panchayati Raj also provides opportunities for rural people to participate in political processes, elect their representatives, discuss development priorities and monitor the implementation of government programmes. The State of Mysore (Renamed Karnataka in 1973) was formed in 1956 by bringing together the erstwhile princely state of Mysore, four districts of Bomby, three districts of Hyderabed, two districts of Madras and the centrally administered territory of Coorg. Prior to the reorganization of states, development of local government institutions, in these five areas had proceeded independently. The devolution of powers and functions having been faster in the British provinces than in the native state. ( Benakanahalli B 2017). The study uses a combination of theoretical frameworks such as Empowerment Theory, Participatory Democracy, and Social Justice, alongside the analysis of recent government policies and judicial interventions, including the Supreme Court-mandated "triple test" for OBC reservation. It highlights both the progress and persistent challenges faced by OBC representatives in navigating rural power structures. The findings suggest that while reservation policies have succeeded in increasing OBC presence in Panchayat, their ability to influence governance outcomes, challenge caste norms, and lead community development varies widely. The study concludes that true empowerment requires more than representation it demands institutional support, education, and grassroots mobilization to ensure that OBC leaders can act as agents of democratic transformation in rural Karnataka (Benakanahalli Basavaraj 2025).

The historical roots of local self-government in India are considerably older than the modern Panchayati Raj system. Village communities traditionally performed a number of collective functions relating to social regulation, management of common resources and settlement of local disputes. Although these traditional institutions differed significantly from

the present democratic Panchayat system, they provided an historical background for the idea of village-level governance. During the colonial period, local institutions were gradually incorporated into formal administrative structures. After Independence, the emphasis shifted towards democratic decentralization and the creation of representative institutions capable of participating in rural development. And Since ancient time, rural India had developed democratic tractions. The main objective was to promote economic development with distributive justice. The people formed little republic institutions to perform function as a unit. It was called as Samiti. In which all the village elders discussed the issues pertaining to the village. It can be compared to the present day gram samba, during the Vedic period each village elders met together to discuss local issues and the venue was called choral participation in the meeting was together considered as a privilege written by (basavaraj b 2017). The Panchayait Raj is a system of governance in which Gram Panchayats are the basic units of administration. Panchayati Raj is a system of local self government where in the people take upon themselves responsibility for development and it's also a system of institutional arrangement through people's initiative and participation. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been involved in the programme implementation and they constitute the core of decentralized development of planning and its implementation. Panchayati Raj Institutions aim at translating the Gandhian dream of village self-governance (Gram Swaraj) and to become an effective tool of rural development and reconstruction. Since 1959, almost all rural development departments have been executing their programmes through PRIs. With the implementation of State Acts under the spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment a clear cut role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural development has been envisaged. Government of India and the different State Governments are now increasingly seeking the assistance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the implementation of various schemes as well as poverty alleviation programmes. Panchayati Raj involves a three tire structure of democratic institutions at district, block and village levels, namely, zilla Parishad, panchayati samiti, and village panchayat respectively. The Panchayati Raj system was first adopted by the state of Rajasthan in the Nagor district on October 2, 1959. The second state was Andhra Pradesh, while Maharashtra was the ninth state.

The evolution of Panchayati Raj in Karnataka is particularly significant because the state has historically been regarded as an important centre of experimentation in decentralized governance. Karnataka's experience predates the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The state's institutional reforms attempted to establish elected local bodies and create a structured relationship between village, intermediate and district levels of administration. This historical experience provides an important basis for understanding the present Panchayati Raj system in Karnataka.

The development of Panchayati Raj has to be understood in the broader context of India's rural development strategy after Independence. During the early decades after Independence, the government introduced community development and rural development programmes with the objective of improving agriculture, infrastructure and living conditions. However, the effectiveness of centrally designed programmes was affected by limited community participation and inadequate coordination at the local level. The experience created a demand for stronger institutions of democratic decentralization that could involve rural people in planning and implementation.

The **Balwantrai Mehta Committee**, appointed in 1957, played an important role in the development of Panchayati Raj in India. The Committee recommended democratic decentralization and a three-tier institutional structure involving village, intermediate and district levels. These recommendations influenced the subsequent development of Panchayati Raj institutions in several states. In Karnataka, as in other parts of India, these ideas contributed to the development of local institutions that could connect rural development programmes with elected representatives and local communities. Karnataka's Panchayat system subsequently underwent several stages of institutional development. The state experimented with decentralized governance structures and gradually moved towards a more integrated three-tier system. The importance of Karnataka in the history of Panchayati Raj is therefore not simply associated with the post-1992 constitutional framework; it also lies in the state's earlier efforts to strengthen elected local government and decentralize development administration.

The next major turning point was the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992**. The amendment gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions and established a broad national framework for rural local government. It provided for Gram Sabhas, regular elections, reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and women, State Election Commissions and State Finance Commissions. It also introduced the Eleventh Schedule containing 29 subjects that could potentially be entrusted to Panchayats. The amendment sought to transform Panchayats from largely administrative institutions into constitutionally recognized institutions of local self-government.

Karnataka responded to the constitutional reform by enacting the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993. The Act established the legal framework for a three-tier Panchayat Raj system consisting of Gram Panchayats at the village level, Taluk Panchayats at the intermediate level and Zilla Panchayats at the district level. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj currently lists the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 as the state's principal Panchayati Raj legislation. The Karnataka legislation sought to strengthen local self-government and facilitate people's participation in rural development.

The evolution of Karnataka's Panchayati Raj system did not stop with the 1993 Act. Subsequent amendments attempted to improve the functioning of local institutions and strengthen grassroots participation. The framework was later associated with the concept of Gram Swaraj, reflecting an emphasis on village-level self-governance. Research on Karnataka notes that the state amended the 1993 Act and subsequently introduced the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj framework, with additional arrangements for habitation- and ward-level participation alongside the Gram Sabha.

An important feature of the evolution of Panchayati Raj has been the increasing emphasis on people's participation. The Gram Sabha is intended to provide citizens with an institutional platform to discuss local issues and participate in development decisions. The strengthening of habitation and ward-level meetings represents an effort to move participation beyond the formal elected body and closer to individual citizens. However, the effectiveness of these institutions depends on awareness, attendance, access to information and the willingness of local institutions to incorporate citizens' views.

Another significant development has been the expansion of women's political representation. Karnataka was an early state in providing reservation for women in Panchayats. Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the Karnataka Panchayat Raj framework provided reservation for women and disadvantaged sections. Later, the Karnataka Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Act, 2010 provided for 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj identifies this provision in its listing of Karnataka's Panchayati Raj legislation. This represents an important shift in the social composition of rural local government.

The evolution of Panchayati Raj is also closely associated with decentralization of rural development. Panchayats have increasingly become involved in the implementation of government programmes relating to employment, housing, sanitation, drinking water, rural infrastructure, social welfare and poverty reduction. The Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act recognizes the Gram Panchayat as an institution of local self-government and provides for the assignment of powers, functions, functionaries and funds necessary for local governance, subject to the statutory framework.

At the same time, the historical evolution of Panchayati Raj reveals a continuing gap between formal decentralization and effective decentralization. Panchayats may receive functions without having sufficient financial resources or administrative personnel to perform them effectively. Brahmanandam's review of Panchayati Raj, drawing particularly on Karnataka, emphasized that merely identifying functions for Panchayats does not ensure meaningful decentralization without adequate financial decentralization. Thus, the evolution of the legal structure needs to be considered alongside the actual transfer of functions, funds and functionaries.

## 2. Review of Literature

**1 Abdul Aziz (1998):** Abdul Aziz examined the broader contours and development of Panchayati Raj in India, with particular relevance to decentralized governance and planning. The study discussed the changing role of Panchayats as institutions of local governance and highlighted the importance of transferring decision-making responsibilities closer to the people. The work is useful for understanding the conceptual and institutional background against which Karnataka's decentralization experience developed. It also provides a foundation for examining Panchayati Raj as an instrument of democratic participation and decentralized planning.

**2 Slater and Watson (1989):** Slater and Watson examined local government reform in Karnataka and discussed the relationship between democratic decentralization and political consolidation. Their study is particularly important because Karnataka had undertaken significant local-government reforms before the national constitution of Panchayati Raj. The authors' analysis helps demonstrate that decentralization is not simply an administrative process but also involves the distribution of political power and decision-making authority. Their work provides an important historical foundation for studying the evolution of Karnataka's Panchayati Raj institutions.

**3 Sutar (2007):** examined the emergence of women's leadership in Panchayats in Karnataka, focusing particularly on the influence of caste and patriarchy. The study noted that reservation had increased the participation of women and disadvantaged sections in grassroots governance. However, it also found that social structures continued to influence

women's leadership and performance. The study is important for understanding the social dimension of Panchayati Raj evolution because institutional reform does not automatically eliminate existing social inequalities.

**4 Brahmanandam (2018):** reviewed the functional aspects of Panchayati Raj after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and incorporated evidence from Karnataka. The study examined the three-tier structure, functions of Panchayats, people's participation and obstacles to effective functioning. A major conclusion was that the assignment of functions to Panchayats requires adequate financial decentralization if local self-government is to become effective. This study is highly relevant because it connects the historical constitutional development of Panchayati Raj with the continuing problem of effective decentralization.

**5 Madhusudhan B. V. Rao et al. (2024):** examined the governance and institutional capability of ten Gram Panchayats in Karnataka through the framework of child-friendly governance. The study highlights the expanding responsibilities of Gram Panchayats in areas such as poverty alleviation, welfare delivery, education, and empowerment of marginalized communities, women and children's welfare. It also notes that Karnataka enacted conformity legislation following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993 and later amended the framework to strengthen local self-governance and participation. The study is useful for understanding the contemporary evolution of Gram Panchayats from basic local administrative bodies towards broader institutions of inclusive governance.

**6 Ministry of Panchayati Raj and Government of Karnataka:** Official documents provide the legislative foundation for understanding the institutional evolution of Panchayati Raj in Karnataka. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj identifies the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 as the state's principal Panchayati Raj legislation and records subsequent amendments, including the 2010 amendment providing 50 per cent reservation for women. The Act itself provides the legal framework for Gram Panchayats as institutions of local self-government and defines their powers and responsibilities. These official sources are essential for tracing the transition from the earlier Panchayat system to the present constitutional and statutory framework.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the historical background and evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka from the pre-independence period.
2. To examine the major institutional changes in Panchayati Raj in Karnataka with special reference to decentralization.

## 4. Interpretation of the Objectives

### 4.1 The historical background and evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka from the pre-independence period.

**1. Traditional Village Institutions during the Pre-Independence Period:** The roots of local self-governance in Karnataka can be traced to traditional village institutions that existed before Independence. Village communities had informal arrangements for managing common resources, resolving local disputes, maintaining community facilities and regulating social affairs. These institutions were not democratic Panchayati Raj Institutions in the modern constitutional sense, but they provided an early foundation for collective decision-making at the village level. During the princely-state and colonial periods, local administration gradually became more formalized, and village-level institutions were increasingly brought within government administrative structures. This historical experience contributed to the later development of organized local self-government in Karnataka.

**2. Development of Local Self-Government before Independence:** During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, the idea of local self-government gained importance under British administrative reforms. The introduction of local boards and district-level institutions created limited opportunities for local participation in administration and public works. In the areas that later formed Karnataka, different administrative arrangements existed under the princely state of Mysore and the Bombay, Madras and Hyderabad Presidencies. Consequently, the development of local institutions was not uniform across the entire region. Nevertheless, these early arrangements gradually introduced the concepts of local representation, local taxation, public works and community administration, which later became important elements of democratic decentralization.

**3. Post-Independence Community Development and Democratic Decentralization:** After Independence, rural development became a major priority of the Indian government. The Community Development Programme of 1952 and the National Extension Service of 1953 attempted to promote agricultural development, infrastructure and improvements in rural living conditions. However, the limited involvement of local communities in these programmes created the need for stronger democratic institutions at the grassroots. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended

democratic decentralization through a three-tier Panchayati Raj system consisting of village, intermediate and district levels. These recommendations significantly influenced the development of Panchayati Raj in Karnataka and other states.

**4. Karnataka's Early Panchayat Raj Reforms:** Karnataka occupies an important position in the history of Panchayati Raj because the state undertook substantial decentralization reforms before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The Karnataka government introduced institutional arrangements designed to strengthen elected local bodies and integrate rural development administration with local government. These reforms gradually established a more structured relationship between village-level, intermediate-level and district-level institutions. Karnataka's experience demonstrated the importance of giving elected representatives a role in rural development planning and implementation. It also provided valuable institutional experience that later influenced the state's response to the national constitutional framework for Panchayati Raj.

**5. Constitutionalisation and Modern Panchayati Raj in Karnataka:** The most significant transformation occurred with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992**,** which gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions throughout India. Karnataka enacted the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, subsequently developed within the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj framework. The system established Gram Panchayats, Taluk Panchayats and Zilla Panchayats as the three principal levels of rural local government. The framework strengthened regular elections, reservation for women and disadvantaged groups, Gram Sabha participation and local development responsibilities. The later provision of 50 per cent reservation for women further expanded women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Thus, Karnataka's Panchayati Raj system evolved from traditional village-level arrangements and early local-government institutions into a constitutionally recognized system of democratic decentralization and rural self-government.

**4.2 The major institutional changes in Panchayati Raj in Karnataka with special reference to decentralization.**

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## 5. Conclusion

The evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Karnataka represents a long process of institutional transformation from traditional forms of village organization to constitutionally recognized democratic local self-government. Karnataka's early experiments with decentralization provided an important foundation for the later Panchayat Raj framework introduced after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 marked a major institutional milestone by establishing the three-tier system of Gram, Taluk and Zilla Panchayats. Subsequent reforms strengthened the idea of Gram Swaraj, people's participation and representation of women and disadvantaged communities. The provision of 50 per cent reservation for women further expanded women's presence in local governance.

The historical evolution of Panchayati Raj also demonstrates that legislation alone cannot ensure effective decentralization. The transfer of functions needs to be accompanied by adequate finances, personnel, technical capacity and administrative authority. Research on Karnataka continues to identify financial and institutional capacity as important dimensions of effective Panchayat governance. The contemporary Panchayati Raj system is increasingly moving towards participatory planning, digital governance, inclusive development and stronger grassroots institutions. Therefore, the evolution of Panchayati Raj in Karnataka should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a completed institutional reform.

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