

The Role of Democracy in Decentralisation of Power

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Abstract:

Decentralisation of power is one of the central principles through which democracy is translated from a constitutional ideal into everyday governance. Democracy becomes meaningful when political authority, administrative responsibility, financial resources, and opportunities for participation are distributed beyond higher levels of government and made accessible to citizens at the local level. In India, the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which came into effect in 1993, marked a major institutional step towards strengthening grassroots democracy.

This paper examines the role of democracy in decentralising political and administrative power, with particular reference to Karnataka and Mysuru district. It discusses local participation, leadership development, responsiveness, resource distribution, social justice, reservation, administrative efficiency, transparency, accountability, and local planning. The paper also uses recent administrative statistics to illustrate the institutional scale of decentralised governance in Karnataka and Mysuru. As of 2025–26, Karnataka had 5,949 Gram Panchayats and 31 Zilla Panchayats; official e-GramSwaraj data also recorded 5,949 Gram Panchayats onboarded and 5,938 with online-payment functionality in the cited reporting period. Mysuru district administration lists 266 Gram Panchayats, eight taluks and nine municipalities. These figures demonstrate the extensive institutional network through which democratic participation can be organised at the grassroots. [1][2]

The paper argues that decentralisation should not be understood merely as administrative delegation. Effective decentralisation requires democratic participation, functional autonomy, adequate financial resources, institutional capacity, transparency, accountability, and meaningful inclusion of women and historically disadvantaged communities. The study concludes that strengthening local democracy is essential for realising the ideals of participatory governance and for transforming citizens from passive beneficiaries into active participants in development.

Keywords — *Democracy, Decentralisation, Panchayati Raj, Local Self-Government, Gram Sabha, Karnataka, Mysuru, Political Participation, Social Justice, Local Governance.*

1. Introduction

Democracy is not confined to the periodic election of representatives. Its deeper meaning lies in the distribution and exercise of public power in a manner that enables citizens to participate in decisions affecting their lives. If decision-making remains concentrated at distant political and administrative centres, democratic participation may become largely formal. Decentralisation seeks to bridge this

gap by transferring appropriate political, administrative and financial responsibilities to lower levels of government.

The principle of decentralisation is closely associated with the idea that local problems are often best understood and addressed by institutions located close to the people. Roads, drinking water, sanitation, local infrastructure, primary services, livelihood concerns and community development are

experienced at the local level. Democratic decentralisation therefore creates an institutional relationship between citizens, elected representatives and public administration.

In India, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, inserted Part IX into the Constitution and provided a constitutional framework for Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj identifies the 73rd Amendment Act, Part IX and the Eleventh Schedule as key constitutional provisions governing Panchayati Raj. [3] The constitutional framework gave local self-government a stronger and more durable position within India's democratic structure.

Karnataka has a long institutional history of Panchayati Raj and has developed a three-tier rural local-government structure comprising Gram Panchayats, Taluk Panchayats and Zilla Panchayats. Recent official data show the scale of this system: Karnataka had 5,949 Gram Panchayats, 238 Taluk Panchayats and 31 Zilla Panchayats in the relevant 2025–26 e-GramSwaraj reporting. [1] The state's Panchayat Raj legislation also provides substantial reservation for women, including provisions under which not less than 50 per cent of seats in specified categories are reserved for women, subject to the statutory overall limit. [4]

Mysuru district provides a useful regional context for examining grassroots democracy. The official district profile records a population of 3,001,127, eight taluks, 1,344 villages, 266 Gram Panchayats and nine municipalities. [5] These institutions provide multiple points through which democratic representation, local planning and service delivery can be connected with citizens.

The present paper therefore analyses decentralisation as a democratic process rather than simply an administrative technique. It examines how the distribution of authority can strengthen participation, responsiveness, inclusion, accountability and development in Karnataka, with specific reference to Mysuru district.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To explain the concept and meaning of decentralisation of power.
2. To examine the significance of decentralisation in a democratic system.

3. To analyse the role of local institutions in promoting citizen participation.

4. To examine the contribution of Panchayati Raj Institutions to grassroots leadership and development.

5. To analyse decentralisation with reference to Karnataka and Mysuru district.

6. To examine the role of reservation in promoting social justice and inclusive representation.

7. To identify the major challenges affecting effective democratic decentralisation.

8. To suggest measures for strengthening local self-government and participatory democracy.

3. Conceptual Understanding of Decentralisation

Decentralisation refers broadly to the transfer or distribution of authority, responsibilities, functions and resources from higher levels of government to lower levels or local institutions. It is distinct from mere administrative deconcentration because democratic decentralisation seeks to create meaningful decision-making authority at the level where citizens can participate and exercise accountability.

Political decentralisation involves the creation or strengthening of elected local institutions. Administrative decentralisation concerns the distribution of implementation responsibilities and public functions. Fiscal decentralisation concerns the availability and control of financial resources. Effective democratic decentralisation requires these dimensions to operate together. A local body that has elected representatives but lacks adequate functions or finances may have formal democratic status without substantive autonomy.

4. Constitutional and Institutional Foundations in India

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, was a landmark in the institutionalisation of rural local self-government. It introduced constitutional provisions concerning Panchayats and created a framework for regular elections, reservation, institutional continuity and local planning. The Eleventh Schedule contains subjects that may be entrusted to Panchayats, thereby providing a broad functional framework for rural development and local governance. [3]

The democratic importance of this framework lies in connecting constitutional democracy with everyday local administration. Gram Sabhas and elected Panchayats create opportunities for citizens to participate in local priorities, examine development needs and hold representatives accountable.

5. Democratic Decentralisation in Karnataka

Karnataka has developed a significant three-tier Panchayati Raj structure. According to recent Government of India e-GramSwaraj reporting for 2025–26, the state had 5,949 Gram Panchayats, 238 Taluk Panchayats and 31 Zilla Panchayats. The same reporting indicates that all 5,949 Gram Panchayats were onboarded on e-GramSwaraj, while 5,938 had online-payment functionality in the cited dataset. [1]

These figures are important not simply as administrative statistics but as indicators of the scale at which decentralised institutions can operate. A network of thousands of Gram Panchayats creates the possibility of bringing planning, public expenditure, service delivery and citizen participation closer to rural communities.

Karnataka's Panchayat Raj legislation also strengthens inclusion through reservation. The Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act provides that not less than fifty per cent of seats in the specified categories are reserved for women, subject to the statutory overall limit. [4] This has important implications for women's participation in grassroots political leadership.

6. Mysuru District: Local Governance Context

Mysuru district provides a significant case for understanding the local dimension of democratic decentralisation. The official district profile records a population of 3,001,127 according to the 2011 Census, an area of 6,307 square kilometres, eight taluks, 1,344 villages, 266 Gram Panchayats and nine municipalities. [5]

The presence of 266 Gram Panchayats indicates a substantial institutional network through which rural citizens can participate in local governance. The district's taluk-level and district-level institutions further connect village-level priorities with broader development planning. In this sense, decentralisation

creates a chain of representation and administration from the village to the district level.

The Mysuru district administration also provides access to district statistical reports and Panchayat-related information, illustrating the increasing importance of public information and digital access in local governance. [6]

7. Direct Participation of Local Citizens

The most important democratic contribution of decentralisation is the opportunity it creates for direct citizen participation. Gram Sabha meetings provide a forum in which local residents can discuss development priorities, public services, local infrastructure and community concerns. Participation at this level can make democratic governance more responsive to actual local needs.

Local participation also strengthens political education. Citizens who engage with local institutions gain practical knowledge about budgets, public works, welfare schemes, administrative procedures and elected representation. Democracy thereby becomes a lived experience rather than an occasional electoral event.

8. Development of Local Leadership

Decentralised institutions provide a training ground for political leadership. Individuals who enter public life through Gram Panchayats and other local bodies acquire experience in deliberation, public communication, planning, conflict management and administrative coordination.

The importance of local leadership is especially significant for young people and women. Local institutions can create pathways through which leadership emerges from communities rather than being confined to established political elites. Over time, successful local leaders may contribute to political institutions at the taluk, district, state or national level.

9. Faster and More Responsive Problem-Solving

Local institutions are often better positioned to identify immediate community problems because elected representatives and residents share the same local environment. When appropriate functions and resources are transferred to local bodies, decisions concerning local roads, sanitation, drinking water,

community infrastructure and other services can potentially be taken closer to the point of need.

Decentralisation therefore reduces unnecessary administrative distance. However, speed and responsiveness depend upon adequate staffing, technical capacity, financial resources and clear allocation of functions. Decentralisation without capacity may merely transfer responsibility without transferring the ability to act.

10. Decentralisation and Equitable Distribution of Resources

Fiscal decentralisation is essential to the effectiveness of political decentralisation. Local institutions require predictable financial resources to implement development priorities. Own-source revenues, grants, finance-commission transfers and programme funds together shape the capacity of local bodies.

When local planning is connected with local financial authority, communities can prioritise expenditure according to their specific needs. Digital platforms such as e-GramSwaraj can further improve visibility of plans, payments and expenditure. Recent official data showing near-universal Gram Panchayat onboarding in Karnataka demonstrate the growing role of digital systems in local financial and planning processes. [1]

11. Social Justice and Reservation

Democratic decentralisation can deepen social justice by opening political institutions to groups that have historically been under-represented. Reservation for women and Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other eligible categories creates institutional opportunities for participation.

Karnataka's statutory framework provides for substantial reservation for women in Panchayat institutions. [4] The significance of such provisions goes beyond numerical representation. Women's participation can broaden the range of issues entering local political discussion and can strengthen the democratic legitimacy of local government.

At the same time, reservation should be accompanied by leadership training, financial literacy, digital literacy, administrative support and genuine decision-making authority. Representation

becomes meaningful when elected members are able to exercise the powers assigned to their offices.

12. Reduction of Administrative Burden

Decentralisation can reduce the administrative burden on higher levels of government by enabling local institutions to handle matters that are primarily local in character. State and district authorities can then concentrate on wider policy, coordination, regulation and monitoring while local bodies address community-level priorities.

This division of responsibilities can improve administrative efficiency, provided that roles are clearly defined and unnecessary duplication between departments and local bodies is reduced.

13. Transparency and Accountability

Local government can make accountability more immediate because representatives are directly connected with the communities they serve. Citizens can raise questions concerning public works, beneficiary selection, local taxation, expenditure and service delivery.

Digital governance strengthens this possibility by making administrative information easier to access. e-GramSwaraj and related digital systems provide an institutional basis for greater visibility of local plans and transactions. The availability of online information, however, must be complemented by public awareness and active Gram Sabha participation.

14. Empirical Snapshot: Karnataka and Mysuru

15. Challenges To Effective Decentralisation

Despite its democratic potential, decentralisation faces several challenges. First, the transfer of functions may not always be accompanied by adequate finances and staff. Second, excessive administrative control from higher levels can limit the autonomy of elected local institutions. Third, local political competition may reproduce social inequalities rather than eliminate them.

Other challenges include limited participation in Gram Sabha meetings, inadequate awareness of local-government procedures, capacity constraints among elected representatives, delays in fund release, weak technical support, and the possibility of elite capture. Digital governance also creates a

new requirement for digital literacy so that technology does not exclude citizens who have limited access or skills.

Therefore, decentralisation must be understood as an ongoing process requiring institutional reform rather than a one-time transfer of responsibilities.

16. Measures for Strengthening Democratic Decentralisation

1. Ensure clear and genuine devolution of functions, funds and functionaries to local bodies.

2. Strengthen Gram Sabha participation through regular meetings, public awareness and accessible information.

3. Improve capacity-building programmes for elected representatives, especially women and first-time representatives.

4. Strengthen local revenue mobilisation while ensuring equitable intergovernmental fiscal transfers.

5. Expand transparent digital systems while simultaneously improving digital literacy and offline access.

6. Strengthen social audit, public disclosure, grievance redressal and local accountability mechanisms.

7. Encourage youth participation and civic education at the village and urban local levels.

8. Reduce unnecessary administrative interference while retaining appropriate legal and financial oversight.

9. Use local data and participatory planning to align development expenditure with community priorities.

17. Findings of The Study

1. Democratic decentralisation converts the principle of popular sovereignty into local institutional practice.

2. Karnataka's extensive Panchayati Raj network provides a substantial institutional base for grassroots participation.

3. Mysuru's 266 Gram Panchayats demonstrate the scale of local institutions through which rural democratic participation can be organised.

4. Reservation provisions create important opportunities for women and disadvantaged groups to enter local political institutions.

5. Digital platforms such as e-GramSwaraj can improve transparency and visibility of local planning and payments.

6. Decentralisation can improve responsiveness, but only when functions, finances, staff and decision-making authority are adequately devolved.

7. Local institutions can nurture new political leadership and strengthen civic education.

8. Effective decentralisation requires active citizens and accountable institutions, not merely elected bodies.

18. Conclusion

Decentralisation of power is not merely an administrative arrangement; it is a foundational mechanism for deepening democracy. Democracy becomes more meaningful when citizens have opportunities to participate in decisions that directly affect their communities. Panchayati Raj Institutions provide an institutional bridge between constitutional democracy and everyday governance.

The constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment created a durable framework for grassroots self-government. Karnataka has built an extensive local-government network, and recent official data show thousands of Gram Panchayats operating within a three-tier system. Mysuru district, with 266 Gram Panchayats, provides a clear example of the institutional reach of local democracy. [1][5]

However, the existence of local institutions alone does not guarantee effective decentralisation. Genuine democratic decentralisation requires the devolution of functions, finances and functionaries; meaningful Gram Sabha participation; capable local leadership; inclusive representation; transparency; social accountability; and institutional autonomy within the constitutional framework.

The ideal of Mahatma Gandhi's Gram Swaraj remains relevant in this context because it emphasises self-governing communities and active citizenship. The contemporary interpretation of Gram Swaraj must, however, be linked with constitutional rights, social justice, gender equality, digital governance and accountable public administration.

Ultimately, decentralisation succeeds when citizens cease to be merely recipients of government

programmes and become active participants in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Strengthening local democracy in Karnataka and Mysuru is therefore not only a matter of administrative efficiency but also a necessary condition for making Indian democracy deeper, more inclusive and more responsive.

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