

PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN KARNATAKA: THE SAKALA (GUARANTEE OF SERVICES) ACT AND ITS EFFECT ON ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The Karnataka Sakala Services Act, 2011 gives citizens a legal right to receive notified government services within fixed time limits and makes officials liable to pay for delay. This study draws on the Sakala Mission portal, government evaluation reports, legislative and court records, and other secondary sources to examine how far the Act has improved accountability. It finds that Sakala made routine services faster and more visible and strengthened supervision within departments, but did much less to make officials answerable to citizens. Compensation was rarely claimed, penalties were rarely imposed, and the monitoring body lacked enforcement powers. Recent reforms, including automatic compensation in 2022 and the 2026 amendment, address these gaps, though their effect is not yet visible in published data.

KEYWORDS: Sakala Act; right to public services; accountability; compensatory cost; public service delivery; Karnataka

1. INTRODUCTION

Delays in routine government services such as caste and income certificates, land records and licences have long troubled citizens in Karnataka. In 2011 the state responded with the Karnataka Guarantee of Services to Citizens Act, popularly known as Sakala. The Act fixes a time limit for each notified service and makes the responsible official pay compensation when that limit is missed. This paper looks at how the Act works, what it has achieved in speed and transparency, and how far it has made officials accountable to the people they serve.

In 2011 the Karnataka legislature passed the Karnataka Guarantee of Services to Citizens Act, now called the Karnataka Sakala Services Act. The idea behind it was easy to state. A citizen who applies for a caste certificate, a driving licence or a khata extract should know the date by which it will arrive, and the official who misses that date should pay for the delay out of their own salary. Karnataka was the tenth state to adopt a right-to-services law, and it began with more services than any of the nine before it [2]. Fourteen years later Sakala processes applications by the crore and reports on-time disposal above 97 percent. The provisions that were meant to make

individual officials answerable to citizens, compensation and penalties, have hardly been used. This paper looks at government data, evaluation studies and newspaper reporting to ask what Sakala has done for accountability and why the results have been uneven.

2. HOW THE ACT WORKS

Each department notifies its services under the Act, along with the designated officer responsible and the number of days allowed. The applicant receives a computerised acknowledgement carrying a Guarantee of Services to Citizens (GSC) number, which can be used to track the file online [1]. If the application is rejected or delayed, the citizen may appeal to a competent officer and then to an appellate authority. Where delay is established, the citizen is entitled to compensatory cost of ₹20 for each day of delay, up to ₹500 per application, and the amount is recovered from the salary of the officer at fault [2].

Implementation was given to a Sakala Mission inside the Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms (DPAR). The DPAR Secretary is ex-officio Mission Director, and the Deputy Commissioner of each district is the district nodal officer [2]. The National Informatics Centre built the tracking software [1]. A pilot began on 1 March 2012 [5], and the scheme went statewide in April 2012 with 151 services from 11 departments. The government first set aside ₹5 crore for the project and later raised this to ₹15 crore [2]. Before launch, every department prepared workflow charts with the Administrative Training Institute (ATI), Mysore and FICCI, mapping the time each functionary would spend on each file. ATI later described this exercise as the base on which individual accountability was built [2].

The list of services grew steadily: 114 were added within seven months of launch [2], and the count reached 725 by the end of 2015 [5], 852 across 73 departments by 2017 [7], 1,033 across 91 departments by 2019 [9], and 1,115 across 99 departments by 2022 [10].

3. WHAT IMPROVED

The first visible change was in speed and record-keeping. By December 2012 the state had received 1.53 crore applications and disposed of 1.50 crore, a disposal rate of 97.87 percent. About 59 percent were Revenue Department services such as caste, income and land records [2]. By October 2019 the cumulative total had passed 20 crore applications received and 20.03 crore disposed, and the in-time "strike rate" for September 2019 was 97.18 percent [8]. In March 2026 the Revenue Minister told the Legislative Council that 99.35 percent of Nada Kacheri applications in the current year had been cleared within the Sakala deadline [15].

These figures matter for accountability in a particular way. Before Sakala, a file could sit on a desk and nobody outside the office would know. The GSC number and the monthly district rankings changed that. Ministers in charge of Sakala released tables naming the best and worst districts; in late 2019 Bengaluru Urban, Vijayapura and Koppal were at the bottom, with pending revenue and khata files singled out as the cause [9]. District administrations now use the data to chase subordinates. In June 2025 the Kalaburagi Deputy Commissioner listed 328 pending applications, 98 of them with the city corporation, and told officers that delays would bring salary deductions and withheld increments [14]. This is accountability within the hierarchy: a superior can see who is late and act on it. The ATI study also found that officials largely welcomed the system, partly because it offered a chance to repair the bureaucracy's public image [2].

4. WHERE ACCOUNTABILITY FALLS SHORT

The Act also promised a second kind of accountability, running from the official to the citizen. A delayed applicant would be paid, and the cost would fall on the person responsible. On this measure the record is weak (Table 1).

Table 1. Compensation and enforcement under Sakala

Period	What the record shows	Source
2012 (first year)	Six citizens compensated across the state	ATI Mysore [2]
2012 to 2015	₹68,000 paid against a ₹5 crore corpus; no disciplinary action under the Act	Sakala Watch, via The Hindu [5]
To Nov. 2017	775 claims worth ₹94,780, against more than 50 lakh late disposals	The Hindu [7]
2012 to Feb. 2022	About 1,800 appeals; ₹3.4 lakh paid in total	ETGovernment [10]
Aug. 2023	More than 1 lakh applications pending; 33,000 in RDPR	Deccan Herald [12]

Few people claimed compensation. Karnataka Sakala Watch, a coalition of citizens' groups, reported in 2016 that compensation cases had fallen from more than 250 a year in 2013 and 2014 to 55 in 2015 [5]. In 2017 a Sakala Mission official estimated that, going by the number of late disposals, at least ₹50 crore should have been paid out by then [7]. The reasons are not hard to find. At ₹20 a day the most a citizen could recover was ₹500, and until 2022 the claim needed a separate application and was paid by demand draft [10]. In 2024 the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, chaired by T.M. Vijay Bhaskar, noted that Karnataka's compensatory cost was the second lowest among states with similar laws [13]. Awareness was also poor: Sakala Watch found that more than 60 percent of citizens, mostly in rural areas, had not heard of Sakala four years after launch [5]. A study by the National Law School of India University (NLSIU) for the Union Law Ministry found offices with outdated Sakala display boards, no help desks, and officers who accepted applications without issuing acknowledgements [6].

The Mission's lack of power is a structural problem. NLSIU found that it "merely monitors the electronic database" and has no statutory power to act against defaulting officers [6]. Applicants who had exhausted their appeals and came to the Mission could not be helped, since the rules did not let it direct departments to pay [7]. A 2014 amendment provided for an inquiry against officials who default more than seven times. During the Assembly debate the Speaker asked why such reports had to go up to the government instead of being acted on in the district, and one member compared the process to "throwing water into the ocean" [3].

Rejection offers a way around the clock. The deadline applies to disposal, so an officer can reject a file and keep the record clean. In October 2019 the Karnataka Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board

rejected 46.75 percent of its Sakala applications and the Karnataka Industrial Areas Development Board 46.59 percent; Bidar district rejected 19.23 percent. The Minister in charge said such rejections were pushing citizens to approach ministers and legislators directly [9]. A year later a Mission inspection at a BBMP revenue office found about 35 percent of applications rejected, some of them a day before the deadline [11]. A high strike rate can therefore conceal a service that was never delivered.

Middlemen have also survived. NLSIU found dalals mediating services in the Transport and Revenue departments [6], and ATI noted that offering the same service through both Sakala and non-Sakala channels left space for them. ATI was careful to add that there was not enough data to say whether Sakala had reduced corruption [2]. Backlogs return when attention drops. Deccan Herald reported in August 2023 that more than one lakh applications were pending, 33,000 of them in the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj department [12]. In July 2025 the High Court of Karnataka, hearing a 2022 PIL by S. Gowri Shankar that sought disposal of pending appeals, payment of compensation and action against defaulters, directed the state to file a status report on pending applications, the dates they were filed and the time needed to clear them [16].

5. ATTEMPTS AT REPAIR

Governments of both major parties have acknowledged these gaps. In December 2017 a draft "Sakala-2" Bill proposed raising compensation to ₹250 a day, allowing penalties of up to ₹50,000 on officials, and creating a Karnataka Public Grievance Redress Commission with power to impose them [4]. The ₹500 cap was still in force in 2024, when the Reforms Commission recommended ₹250 a day with a ceiling of ₹25,000 [13].

In 2022 the state moved to automatic compensation. Under the new system compensation accrues from the first day of delay and is credited to the citizen's bank account, using the Aadhaar number, within seven days of delivery; the amount is taken from the defaulting official's salary [10][19]. Public reporting has not yet shown how much has been paid under this system. In August 2026 the legislature passed the Karnataka Sakala Services (Amendment) Bill, 2026, moved by Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar. It allows the government to revise the ₹500 cap and the delivery deadlines, gives the state revisionary powers over orders of lower authorities, creates a statutory remedy for citizens wrongly denied compensation with recovery from the defaulting public servant, and permits penal costs on vexatious complainants [17]. In September 2026 the government announced a Praja Seva Department that brings the Sakala Mission, the public grievances division and administrative reforms under one department [18]. Analysts quoted by The Times of India welcomed the move but warned that it must not "go the Sakala way" [20].

6. CONCLUSION

Sakala made delay visible. It gave each application a number and a due date, and it gave senior officers a way to track and press their subordinates. For high-volume services such as certificates and land mutations, this has brought real gains in speed. The Act has done much less to make officials answerable to the citizens they serve. Compensation was set too low to matter, claiming it was tedious, penalties were seldom imposed, and the body that watched the system could not enforce it. Rejections and parallel non-Sakala channels let some departments meet the clock without delivering the service.

The 2022 automation and the 2026 amendment address the right problems. Whether they work will show up in figures the state has rarely published: compensation actually paid, officers actually penalised, and rejection rates

by department. Releasing those numbers every month, in the same way Sakala once published disposal rankings, would let citizens and the courts judge whether the Act's promise is being kept.

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