



Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative: A Catalyst for India's \$5 Trillion Economy Vision

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ABSTRACT

India's aspiration to become a \$5 trillion economy by the mid-2030s requires inclusive, sustainable, and grassroots-driven growth. Cooperative institutions, particularly in Karnataka, play a vital role in mobilizing resources, empowering communities, and fostering socio-economic development. Among them, the Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative (KSSFCL) has emerged as a unique model that blends cooperative principles with flexibility and autonomy under the Souharda Act, 1997. This paper explores the role and vision of KSSFCL in strengthening India's economic growth trajectory. The study highlights how KSSFCL contributes through financial intermediation, member-centric services, women and youth empowerment, and support for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). It also examines the challenges of regulatory compliance, governance, and digital transformation that must be addressed to enhance its impact. By analyzing its operations and strategic initiatives, the paper argues that KSSFCL can serve as a catalyst for inclusive development and act as a bridge between cooperative values and modern economic imperatives. The findings suggest that the Souharda model, when effectively harnessed, can contribute significantly to India's \$5 trillion economy vision by promoting cooperative entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and community-led growth.



Introduction

India's vision of becoming a \$5 trillion economy requires not only large-scale industrial and technological advancements but also strong grassroots-level institutions that ensure inclusive and equitable development. Cooperatives, as member-owned and community-driven institutions, play a crucial role in bridging the gap between economic growth and social welfare (NABARD, 2023). Karnataka, known as the pioneer of the *Souharda Sahakari Movement*, has introduced a distinct model of cooperatives under the Karnataka Souharda Sahakari Act, 1997, providing autonomy, transparency, and flexibility in cooperative functioning (Government of Karnataka, 1997).

The Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative Ltd. (KSSFCL), headquartered in Bengaluru, acts as the apex body for all Souharda societies in the state. As of 31st March 2025, Karnataka hosts 6,500 registered Souharda cooperatives, covering sectors such as credit, thrift, consumer, employees, dairy, housing, education, multipurpose, industry, agriculture, and others. Among these, credit cooperatives dominate with 4,896 societies, followed by multipurpose (1,288) and housing (35) cooperatives. The geographical spread indicates a strong presence in districts like Belagavi (1,221), Vijayapura (602), Bagalakot (485), and Bengaluru Urban (509), reflecting the cooperative movement's depth and outreach across both rural and urban Karnataka.

These cooperatives are not only financial intermediaries but also social institutions promoting employment, entrepreneurship, and women empowerment. The Souharda model emphasizes self-reliance, democratic participation, and community-centric growth, aligning well with India's macroeconomic goals. However, the sector also faces challenges such as limited capital mobilization, digital adaptation, and the need for stronger governance mechanisms (RBI, 2022).

This paper seeks to analyze the role and vision of KSSFCL in driving Karnataka's cooperative movement and its contribution to India's \$5 trillion economy aspiration. By examining both quantitative data and qualitative insights, the study highlights how Souharda cooperatives can act as a catalyst for inclusive growth, ensuring that economic prosperity reaches the grassroots level.

Review of Literature

The cooperative movement in India has historically been recognized as a powerful instrument for socio-economic transformation, particularly in rural areas (Kurien, 2010). Originating as a means to protect farmers and weaker sections from exploitative moneylenders, cooperatives gradually evolved into multi-sectoral institutions that address credit, agriculture, housing, and consumer needs (Baviskar & Attwood,



2014). The Government of India has consistently emphasized the cooperative model as a tool for inclusive development, highlighting its importance in achieving sustainable growth (NABARD, 2023).

The role of cooperatives in promoting financial inclusion, employment, and entrepreneurship. Birchall (2013) notes that cooperatives provide an alternative economic structure that balances profitability with social responsibility. Studies also highlight their potential in mobilizing local resources and reinvesting them within communities, thereby contributing directly to GDP growth (ICA, 2020). In India, credit cooperatives, in particular, have been critical in extending microfinance and low-cost credit to marginalized populations (RBI, 2022).

The introduction of the Karnataka Souharda Sahakari Act, 1997 marked a paradigm shift in cooperative governance. Unlike the traditional cooperative system, Souharda cooperatives are member-driven and function with greater autonomy and democratic accountability (Government of Karnataka, 1997). Studies by Hiremath (2015) and Kulkarni (2019) highlight how the Souharda model has reduced bureaucratic control, encouraged innovation, and improved transparency in cooperative management.

The Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative Ltd. (KSSFCL) acts as the umbrella organization for Souharda societies, facilitating training, guidance, and policy advocacy. Patil (2021) stresses its role in modernizing cooperatives by promoting digitization, capacity building, and inter-cooperative networking. Empirical studies also indicate that districts with strong Souharda penetration, such as Belagavi and Vijayapura, exhibit higher levels of cooperative-driven financial activity (Shivalli, 2022).

Research Gap

While literature recognizes the contributions of cooperatives to rural development, relatively few studies have explicitly analyzed the impact of Souharda cooperatives on India's macroeconomic targets, such as the \$5 trillion economy vision. Most existing works are descriptive, focusing on governance reforms, structural differences, and sectoral achievements. There is limited empirical evidence linking Souharda cooperatives with broader national economic goals, which creates a significant research gap that this paper aims to address.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the growth and spread of Souharda cooperatives across Karnataka under the Karnataka Souharda Sahakari Act, 1997.



2. To analyze the role of the Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative Ltd. (KSSFCL) in strengthening cooperative federalism and inclusive growth.
3. To assess the contribution of Souharda cooperatives towards India's \$5 trillion economy vision.
4. To identify challenges and suggest policy recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of Souharda cooperatives.

Data Sources

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected through structured discussions with cooperative members, officials of the Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative Ltd. (KSSFCL), and selected representatives of Souharda societies across different districts of Karnataka. Secondary data was obtained from official records of KSSFCL, Bengaluru.

Limitations of the Study

- The study primarily relies on secondary data, which may not capture the dynamic operational challenges faced by societies.
- Lack of uniform financial disclosure across societies limits detailed financial analysis.
- The contribution of Souharda cooperatives to India's \$5 trillion economy vision is assessed indirectly, as no direct GDP contribution data is available.

**Growth of Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperatives as on 31-03-2025**

| No of Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperatives as on 31-03-2025 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------------|--------|--------|------|----------|-----------|-------|---------|-----------|---------------|----------|-------------|--------|--------|-------|------|-----------|-----|
| SI_No | District | Credit | Thrift | Bank | Consumer | Employees | Dairy | Housing | Education | Multi purpose | Industry | Agriculture | Labour | Others | Total | New | Converted | |
| 1 | Bidar | 142 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 169 | 165 | 4 |
| 2 | Kalaburagi | 217 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 248 | 245 | 3 |
| 3 | Yadgiri | 69 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 78 | 75 | 3 |
| 4 | Ballari | 89 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 112 | 110 | 2 |
| 5 | Raichur | 359 | 24 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 27 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 418 | 411 | 7 |
| 6 | Koppal | 352 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 74 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 441 | 433 | 8 |
| 7 | Vijayanagara | 139 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 38 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 181 | 176 | 5 |
| 8 | Vijayapura | 467 | 17 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 108 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 602 | 588 | 14 |
| 9 | Bagalakot | 438 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 39 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 485 | 474 | 11 |
| 10 | Belagavi | 725 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 480 | 3 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1221 | 1003 | 218 |
| 11 | Dharwad | 113 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 30 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 150 | 141 | 9 |
| 12 | Gadag | 65 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 79 | 70 | 9 |
| 13 | Haveri | 123 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 33 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 168 | 155 | 13 |
| 14 | North Canara | 227 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 10 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 272 | 251 | 21 |
| 15 | South Canara | 97 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 34 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 139 | 135 | 4 |
| 16 | Udupi | 117 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 36 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 155 | 151 | 4 |
| 17 | Kodagu | 12 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 14 | 1 |
| 18 | Mysuru | 58 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 84 | 77 | 7 |
| 19 | Chamarajanagar | 24 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 33 | 33 | 0 |
| 20 | Hassan | 50 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 19 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 72 | 71 | 1 |
| 21 | Mandya | 27 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 32 | 32 | 0 |
| 22 | Chikkamagaluru | 42 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 59 | 56 | 3 |
| 23 | Shivamogga | 104 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 65 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 183 | 175 | 8 |
| 24 | Chitradurga | 71 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 104 | 93 | 11 |
| 25 | Davanagere | 63 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 92 | 87 | 5 |
| 26 | Tumakuru | 199 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 247 | 230 | 17 |
| 27 | Kolar | 29 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 41 | 41 | 0 |
| 28 | Chikkaballapur | 19 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 48 | 47 | 1 |
| 29 | Ramanagar | 10 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 21 | 3 |
| 30 | Bengaluru Rural | 33 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 39 | 38 | 1 |
| 31 | Bengaluru Urban | 398 | 4 | 1 | 8 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 80 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 509 | 455 | 54 |
| | Total | 4878 | 89 | 17 | 23 | 8 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1288 | 28 | 33 | 12 | 18 | 29 | 6500 | 6053 | 447 |

Data Analysis

As of 31st March 2025, a total of 6,500 Souharda Cooperative Societies are registered across 31 districts of Karnataka, spread over four major divisions: Kalaburagi, Belagavi, Mysuru, and Bengaluru. Out of these, 6,054 are new societies registered under the Karnataka Souharda Sahakari Act, 1997, while 446 are converted societies from earlier cooperative structures.



In terms of functional classification, Credit cooperatives dominate the sector with 4,896 societies, accounting for more than 75% of the total. This is followed by Multipurpose cooperatives (1,288), Housing (61), Agriculture (61), Consumer (35), Education (61), Banks (18), Employees (35), Industry (17), Labour (24), Dairy (3), and Others (24). This indicates that Souharda cooperatives in Karnataka are largely credit-driven, with other sectors showing relatively smaller presence.

Division-wise, the Belagavi Division leads with 3,019 societies, contributing to nearly half of the total, followed by Kalaburagi Division with 1,684 societies, Bengaluru Division with 1,024 societies, and Mysuru Division with 773 societies.

At the district level, Belagavi tops the list with 1,221 societies, of which 1,003 are newly registered and 218 are converted. Other districts with high numbers include Vijayapura (602), Bagalakot (485), Kalaburagi (248), Raichur (418), and North Canara (272). Districts with relatively fewer societies include Kodagu (15), Ramanagar (24), Mandya (32), and Chamarajanagar (33).

The data also shows a strong trend towards new registrations, with most districts having above 90% of their cooperatives established directly under the Souharda Act. Converted societies are fewer, concentrated in older cooperative hubs like Belagavi (218), Vijayapura (14), and Bengaluru Urban (54).

Overall, the analysis highlights that Souharda cooperatives in Karnataka are credit-centric, regionally concentrated in Belagavi and Kalaburagi divisions, and are witnessing steady expansion under the Souharda framework.

The Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative Ltd. (KSSFCL) in strengthening cooperative federalism and inclusive growth. discussion

The Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative Ltd. (KSSFCL) plays a pivotal role in promoting cooperative federalism and inclusive growth in Karnataka. By functioning as an apex body, KSSFCL not only coordinates and strengthens the activities of Souharda cooperative societies across districts but also ensures that their functioning aligns with the broader objectives of participatory democracy, economic inclusion, and decentralized governance.

1. Strengthening Cooperative Federalism

KSSFCL has been instrumental in creating a decentralized and member-driven structure that empowers societies at the grassroots level. Unlike traditional cooperatives bound by excessive state control, Souharda cooperatives enjoy autonomy under the Karnataka Souharda Sahakari Act, 1997. KSSFCL acts



as a unifying platform, linking thousands of local societies (6,500 as of March 2025) into a federal framework. This multi-tier system mirrors the essence of federalism—power is distributed, and decision-making occurs from bottom to top. By enabling societies in diverse sectors such as credit, housing, agriculture, industry, and multipurpose services, KSSFCL fosters a cooperative ecosystem that balances local autonomy with state-level coordination.

2. Promoting Inclusive Growth

KSSFCL's efforts extend beyond economic efficiency; they emphasize inclusivity and equitable development. With over 4,800 credit cooperatives and a significant presence in rural districts like Belagavi, Vijayapura, and Raichur, KSSFCL ensures financial services reach marginalized groups and small farmers. The presence of housing, education, labour, and multipurpose cooperatives further contributes to holistic rural development. By addressing varied socio-economic needs—credit accessibility, housing support, educational initiatives, and employment generation—Souharda cooperatives under KSSFCL reduce inequalities and support inclusive growth.

3. Innovation and Adaptability

Through its flexible structure, KSSFCL allows societies to innovate and adapt to regional needs. For example, credit cooperatives dominate in regions with high agricultural dependence, while multipurpose cooperatives serve areas with diverse community requirements. This adaptability strengthens the cooperative model and enhances resilience against market fluctuations, thereby ensuring sustainable growth.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

Despite its achievements, KSSFCL faces challenges in ensuring audit compliance, professional management, and reducing administrative costs across societies. In some districts, cooperative penetration remains low (e.g., Kodagu, Ramanagar, Mandya), indicating a need for targeted interventions. Strengthening digital infrastructure, skill development, and women's participation in cooperatives represent significant opportunities for expanding both cooperative federalism and inclusive growth.

Overall, KSSFCL exemplifies the spirit of cooperative federalism by empowering local societies while providing a federal umbrella of support and guidance. At the same time, its inclusive approach contributes significantly to equitable development across Karnataka. With further emphasis on



transparency, professionalization, and technology adoption, KSSFCL can emerge as a national model for cooperative-driven inclusive growth.

Contribution of Souharda Cooperatives towards India's \$5 Trillion Economy Vision

1. Expanding Financial Inclusion

Souharda credit cooperatives play a major role in providing banking and credit services to rural households, small farmers, and micro-entrepreneurs who are often excluded from formal banking. By making affordable credit available at the grassroots, these cooperatives stimulate entrepreneurship, consumption, and local investments, which are critical drivers of GDP growth.

2. Supporting Agriculture and Rural Development

With a strong presence in rural districts such as Belagavi, Raichur, and Koppal, Souharda cooperatives contribute to agricultural productivity by financing seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, and small-scale farm equipment. They also reduce farmers' dependence on moneylenders, thereby increasing farm profitability. This support enhances rural incomes and strengthens India's agricultural contribution to the economy.

3. Boosting MSMEs and Local Enterprises

Multipurpose and industry cooperatives under the Souharda model support micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) through credit, inputs, and marketing support. These MSMEs form the backbone of India's manufacturing and services sector, and their growth is vital for achieving the \$5 trillion economy target. By nurturing small enterprises, Souharda cooperatives expand the productive base of the economy.

4. Employment Generation

Cooperatives create direct jobs in management, administration, and cooperative-owned enterprises. Indirectly, they generate self-employment opportunities by supporting small businesses and agricultural activities. Employment growth directly feeds into increased income and demand, which fuels higher GDP growth.

5. Encouraging Women's Participation and Empowerment



Many Souharda cooperatives promote women's membership and leadership, providing them with access to finance and livelihood opportunities. Women's economic participation strengthens household income security and creates inclusive growth, aligning with India's vision of equitable development.

6. Promoting Social Capital and Collective Action

Cooperatives operate on democratic, member-driven principles. This builds trust, social capital, and community participation, which are essential for sustainable and inclusive development. When communities organize through cooperatives, they are better able to address local needs and contribute to balanced regional development.

7. Reducing Regional Imbalances

The spread of Souharda societies across 31 districts of Karnataka ensures that economic opportunities are not concentrated only in urban centers. For example, Belagavi alone has over 1,200 societies, while northern districts like Vijayapura and Bagalakot also show strong cooperative activity. This decentralized development reduces regional disparities and ensures more balanced growth, a necessity for reaching the \$5 trillion goal.

8. Stimulating Consumption and Domestic Demand

By enhancing incomes of rural households and small entrepreneurs, Souharda cooperatives strengthen domestic demand. As household purchasing power increases, it drives consumption of goods and services, contributing to overall economic growth.

9. Encouraging Innovation and Adaptability

Souharda cooperatives enjoy greater autonomy under the Karnataka Souharda Sahakari Act, 1997, compared to traditional cooperatives. This flexibility allows them to innovate—whether by adopting digital platforms, diversifying into new sectors, or tailoring services to local needs thus enhancing their contribution to economic resilience and long-term growth.

10. Aligning with National Development Goals

The Souharda model supports multiple national priorities—financial inclusion, rural development, women empowerment, MSME growth, and digital economy adoption. By complementing government policies such as Atmanirbhar Bharat and Doubling Farmers' Income, these cooperatives become vital partners in India's journey toward a \$5 trillion economy.



Policy Recommendations for Souharda Cooperatives

A. Economic Recommendations

1. **Promote sectoral diversification beyond credit societies** – expand into housing, industry, health, and education.
2. **Develop targeted outreach in low-penetration districts** – ensure balanced regional cooperative growth.
3. **Encourage shared services models to reduce costs** – pooling accounting, procurement, and IT functions.
4. **Build linkages with government schemes and markets** – integrate with programs like NABARD, PMEGP, and MSME value chains.

B. Social Recommendations

5. **Conduct financial literacy and awareness programs** – educate members about entrepreneurship and cooperative benefits.
6. **Incentivize women-led and youth-led cooperatives** – promote inclusivity and leadership diversity.
7. **Strengthen cooperative-based skill development** – train members in entrepreneurship, digital skills, and sustainable practices.

C. Governance Recommendations

8. **Introduce centralized digital audit and timely reporting** – improve transparency and accountability.
9. **Establish training and certification for cooperative managers** – professionalize management practices.
10. **Strengthen self-regulation and minimize political interference** – safeguard autonomy under the Souharda Act.
11. **Launch digital transformation and e-governance platforms** – modernize cooperative operations and enhance member participation.



Conclusion

The Karnataka State Souharda Federal Cooperative Ltd. (KSSFCL) and its affiliated societies have emerged as a dynamic force in strengthening cooperative federalism and promoting inclusive growth. With over 6,500 societies across 31 districts, the Souharda movement has successfully mobilized local communities, expanded financial inclusion, and supported rural development through its strong presence in credit, multipurpose, and sector-specific cooperatives.

The study highlights that Souharda cooperatives contribute significantly to India's \$5 trillion economy vision by enabling grassroots entrepreneurship, supporting MSMEs, generating employment, empowering women, and reducing regional imbalances. Their democratic and member-driven structure ensures that growth is not limited to urban centers but reaches rural and semi-urban areas as well.

However, challenges such as weak audit systems, lack of professional management, uneven regional spread, overdependence on credit societies, and limited digital adoption need to be addressed to unlock their full potential. Policy recommendations focusing on economic diversification, social inclusivity, and governance reforms can provide the much-needed impetus to strengthen the cooperative sector.

Souharda cooperatives exemplify the spirit of self-reliant, people-centric development. With greater professionalization, digital transformation, and stronger linkages to markets and government schemes, they can serve as a model of sustainable cooperative growth not only for Karnataka but for the entire nation. By harnessing their collective strength, Souharda cooperatives can become a vital partner in achieving India's vision of a \$5 trillion economy while ensuring equity, participation, and resilience at the grassroots.

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