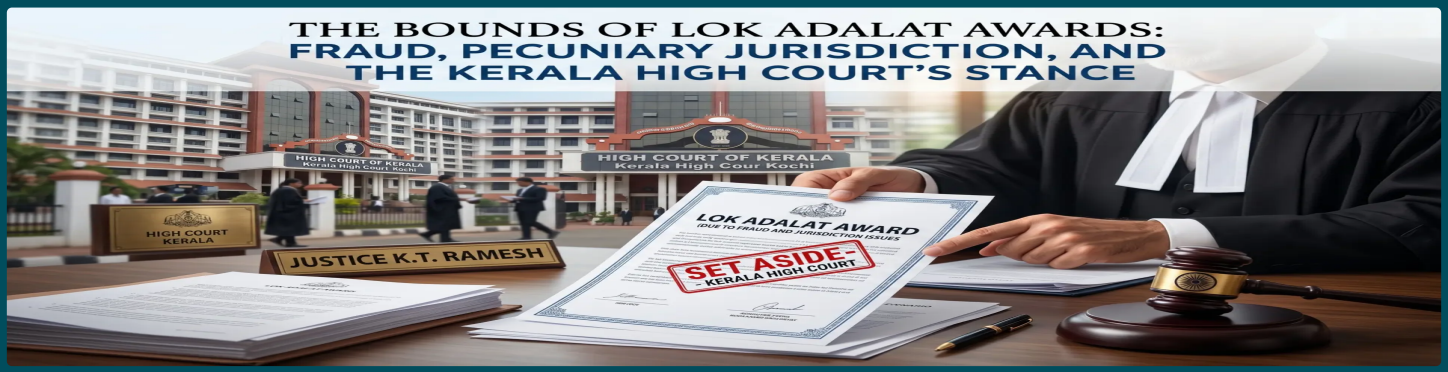
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The Bounds of Lok Adalat Awards: Fraud, Pecuniary Jurisdiction, and the Kerala High Court's Stance

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PUBLISHED 21 April 2026

The sanctity and enforceability of awards passed by Lok Adalats form a cornerstone of the alternative dispute resolution mechanism in India. In a significant judicial pronouncement, the High Court of Kerala addressed complex questions surrounding the jurisdictional limits of Taluk Legal Services Committees and the threshold for establishing fraud in compromise decrees.

The judgment, rendered by **Justice Harisankar V. Menon** in the writ petition titled *Prasanth P. Kumar & Anr. v. State of Kerala & Ors.* (Citation: 2026:KER:26747), provides profound clarity on the statutory framework governing Legal Services Authorities. By systematically dismantling challenges based on pecuniary jurisdiction and alleged coercion, the Court reinforced the binding nature of settlements reached through Lok Adalats.

Background: The Failed Real Estate Transaction

The litigation traces its origins to a **real estate transaction** that ultimately failed to materialize. The petitioners, Prasanth P. Kumar, aged thirty-nine, and Shyamalakumari alias Shyamladevi, aged sixty-five, both residents of Prasanth Bhavan in Adoor Taluk of Pathanamthitta District, entered into a series of sale agreements with the fourth respondent, fifty-three-year-old Radhakrishna Pillai.

Following initial agreements executed on December 2, 2021, and March 17, 2022, a final sale agreement was formalized on June 10, 2022. Pursuant to these agreements, the fourth respondent advanced a substantial sum exceeding ninety lakhs, specifically amounting to **?98,35,000**.

When the intended sale collapsed, the petitioners expressed their willingness to refund the advance amount in accordance with the terms of their contract, yet they subsequently failed to repay.

Proceedings Before the Taluk Legal Services Committee

Faced with the petitioners' default, the fourth respondent approached the **Adoor Taluk Legal Services Committee**, arrayed as the third respondent, by filing a complaint. The procedural chronology advanced rapidly thereafter.

The petitioners were summoned via telephone and appeared before the Committee on the very next day, October 19, 2022, notably accompanied by their legal counsel. During this proceeding, a compromise was struck, culminating in an **award dated November 12, 2022**.

The award recorded the petitioners' explicit undertaking to refund the sum of ?98,35,000 on or before April 5, 2023, using post-dated cheques handed over to the fourth respondent.

Execution Proceedings and the Writ Petition Challenge

The dispute escalated when the aforementioned **post-dated cheques were dishonoured** upon presentation. Consequently, the fourth respondent initiated execution proceedings by filing an execution petition, E.P. No. 15 of 2023, before the Sub Court in Pathanamthitta.

The petitioners actively participated in the execution stage, filing an objection. It was only after participating in these execution proceedings that the petitioners instituted the present writ petition, mounting a substantive challenge against the foundational Lok Adalat award.

Key Legal Contentions Before the High Court

The adjudication before the High Court fundamentally revolved around **two primary legal contentions**: whether the Lok Adalat award was vitiated by fraud, and whether the Adoor Taluk Legal Services Committee possessed the requisite jurisdiction under Section 19(5) of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987.

Petitioners' Arguments: Fraud and Lack of Jurisdiction

Representing the petitioners, **Advocate T.M. Raman Kartha** vehemently argued that the entire proceeding was tainted by fraud. His key contentions included:

- The telephonic summons provided *unreasonably short notice*, effectively forcing the petitioners into a compromise against their volition.

- The Taluk Committee lacked the authority to issue an award of such high monetary magnitude.
- Under Section 19(5)(ii) of the Act, pecuniary limits must apply, and since Adoor Taluk did not possess a Sub Court capable of entertaining a suit of this financial volume, the Committee was inherently devoid of jurisdiction.

Respondents' Counter-Arguments

These arguments met with strong opposition from the respondents:

- **Advocate K. Shaj**, appearing for the fourth respondent, refuted the allegations of fraud by highlighting the petitioners' voluntary appearance alongside their lawyer.
- He relied heavily on the authoritative Supreme Court precedent in *K. Srinivasappa & Ors v. M. Mallamma & Ors* (AIR 2022 SC 2381), emphasizing that a Lok Adalat award cannot be unsettled by a constitutional court unless fraud is conclusively and irrefutably established by the aggrieved party.
- **Advocate Shameena Salahudheen**, representing the Kerala State Legal Services Authority and the Adoor Taluk Committee, addressed the jurisdictional dispute by introducing an invaluable legal precedent from the Andhra Pradesh High Court in W.P. No. 6190 of 2019.
- That precedent explicitly clarified that the Legal Services Authorities Act prescribes *territorial jurisdiction* without imposing any restrictive pecuniary ceilings.

Court's Analysis: Allegation of Fraud

Justice Harisankar V. Menon conducted a careful analysis of the competing arguments, addressing the **allegation of fraud** first. The Court observed that the claims of coercion were precariously balanced on mere averments confined to paragraph four of the writ petition.

The bench critically noted the inherent contradiction in the petitioners' stance: they claimed to have been forced into a settlement, yet simultaneously admitted that there was no physical coercion compelling their attendance and that they were actively represented and advised by **legal counsel** during the proceedings.

Applying the jurisprudential standard established in *K. Srinivasappa*, the Court resolutely determined that the threshold to prove fraud had not been met, thereby dismissing the coercion argument as legally untenable.

Court's Analysis: Jurisdictional Challenge

Turning to the pivotal issue of jurisdiction, the Court recognized the superficial attractiveness of the petitioners' pecuniary argument but ultimately dismantled it through **rigorous statutory interpretation**.

By deeply analyzing **Section 19(5) of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987**, the Court concluded that the legislative framing of the provision deliberately speaks only to territorial jurisdiction. The statute is conspicuously silent regarding pecuniary limits for Taluk Legal Services Committees.

To buttress this interpretation, the Court aligned itself with the rationale provided by the Andhra Pradesh High Court and invoked the Kerala High Court's own historical precedent in *Thomas @ Thomas v. Florance* (2006 (3) KLT 717), reinforcing the principle that a Taluk Committee is entirely competent to entertain complaints **irrespective of the monetary value involved**.

Conclusion: Writ Petition Dismissed

The Kerala High Court's judgment firmly upholds the **institutional efficacy of the Lok Adalat system** by protecting its awards from belated and inadequately substantiated challenges.

By categorically rejecting the allegation of fraud due to the presence of legal counsel and definitively ruling that the Legal Services Authorities Act does not circumscribe the jurisdiction of Taluk Committees with pecuniary limits, the Court found no merit in the petitioners' contentions.

Consequently, the **writ petition was dismissed**, preserving the validity of the Lok Adalat award and ensuring that alternative dispute resolution mechanisms remain strong, binding, and resilient against statutory misinterpretations.

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