
EVOLUTION OF THE COURT SYSTEM IN INDIA: FROM ANCIENT JUSTICE TO SMART COURTS

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ABSTRACT

The Indian court system represents one of the world's most continuous and adaptive traditions of justice, evolving from ancient customary and religious adjudication to a constitutionally grounded, technology-driven judiciary. This paper traces the historical trajectory of courts in India from the earliest civilizations of the subcontinent through medieval transformations, colonial institutionalization, post-independence constitutional consolidation, and finally the emergence of the Smart Court paradigm in the digital age. By situating judicial evolution within political authority, legal philosophy, and administrative reform, the study demonstrates how Indian courts have consistently balanced continuity and change. The contemporary Smart Court initiative characterized by e-filing, virtual hearings, artificial intelligence-assisted processes, and data-driven judicial administration marks not a rupture but the latest phase in a long tradition of institutional modernization aimed at enhancing access to justice, transparency, and efficiency.

Keywords: Indian judicial history; court system in India; ancient Indian law; colonial courts; constitutional judiciary; e-Courts; Smart Courts; legal modernization

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INTRODUCTION

The development of Indian statehood, government, and legal philosophy are all intricately linked to the country's court history. India's courts evolved gradually over centuries, reflecting the subcontinent's varied social, cultural, and political landscapes, in contrast to many other jurisdictions where judicial systems were imposed quickly by codification, conquest, or revolutionary reform. Dharma, the moral and ethical code that regulated social,³ familial, and individual behaviour in ancient India, served as the foundation for the oldest ideas of justice.⁴ A decentralised and socially ingrained style of conflict resolution was highlighted by the fact that these early standards were frequently upheld by assemblies or community elders. As kingdoms and empires grew throughout time, more formalised adjudicatory systems developed. For instance, the Mauryan era combined judicial supervision with administrative government by establishing royal courts under the emperor's direction. The Dharmaśāstras, which codified civil remedies, criminal penalties, and procedural norms, were among the works used throughout the Gupta dynasty to further systematise legal ideas.⁵ India's courts absorbed additional layers of jurisprudential thought, including Sharia-based concepts alongside customary practices, with the arrival of Islamic control, notably the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. This resulted in a pluralistic and hybridised legal framework. Indian adjudication under British colonial control saw a significant change. A foundation for contemporary statutory adjudication was established by the British with the introduction of formalised courts, hierarchical institutions, and codified laws like the Evidence Act, Civil Procedure Code, and Indian Penal Code.⁶ The conflicts between imported legal reasoning and native customs were reflected in the frequent coexistence of colonial courts with traditional local panchayats and religious courts. While the era changed ideas of sovereignty and legal power, it also set the foundation for institutional continuity and flexibility. After gaining independence in 1947, India ratified a constitution that gave courts a crucial role in democratic

³ Chhitij Srivastava et al., *Morality and Moral Development: Traditional Hindu Concepts*, 55 INDIAN J. PSYCHIATRY S283 (2013), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3705697/>.

⁴ Arti Dhand, *The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma: Quizzing the Ideals of Hinduism*, 30 J. RELIG. ETHICS 347 (2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40018090>.

⁵ Shashi Motilal & Jeremiah Dumai, *Human Rights or Moral Obligations?: The Link with Natural Law in Hinduism*, in THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF NATURAL LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS 247 (Iain T. Benson, Mark D. Retter, & Tom Angier eds., 2022), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-handbook-of-natural-law-and-human-rights/human-rights-or-moral-obligations/06D27C25CE20474A9B2269142640FF0C>.

⁶ ROYZZ, Co-Dhanashree Chowdhury & Mahua Roy Chowdhury, *The Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), and the Indian Evidence Act to Be Revamped*, LEXOLOGY (Sept. 6, 2023), <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=c84a6d2d-d128-4ad4-b8ef-cac874bbdbd8>.

governance by upholding the rule of law, fundamental rights, and judicial independence. The court developed into a protector of constitutionalism, increasing everyone's access to justice while maintaining a balance between the legislative and executive branches. The way the courts have handled social injustices, environmental issues, and human rights concerns is demonstrated by landmark rulings and the growth of Public Interest Litigation (PIL), which further reflects the fluidity of Indian judicial thought. With the creation of Smart Courts and e-justice programs, India's court has embraced technological innovation in the twenty-first century. In the lengthy history of Indian adjudication, digital case management systems, online filing,⁷ video conferencing, and algorithmic tracking of judicial workloads mark a new era that combines efficiency with the Constitution's guarantee of access to justice. These developments show how the courts are still changing to meet the requirements of society, fusing centuries-old ideas of justice with modern demands for openness and efficiency. This paper traces the development of courts from the ancient Dharma-based dispute resolution system to the modern Smart Court model using a historical and institutional methodology. The study illustrates how earlier legal, administrative, and moral frameworks served as the basis for later advances by examining each historical era. The Smart Court paradigm, which places digital justice within India's longstanding constitutional and social responsibilities, is the culmination of the continuous conversation between tradition and modernity.

CHRONOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF THE INDIAN COURT SYSTEM

Historical Phase	Approximate Period	Core Judicial Features	Institutional Legacy
Ancient Period	c. 1500 BCE – 1200 CE	Dharma-based justice; royal and community courts; moral-religious authority	Normative foundations of justice and equity
Medieval Period	c. 1200 – 1757	Sultanate and Mughal courts; Qazi system; integration of Islamic law with custom	Centralized adjudication and appellate ideas

⁷ *E-Filing Services for Online Filing of Cases, Plaints, Written Statements, Replies and Various Applications Related to Cases before Any High Court or District Court of the Country*, <https://filing.ecourts.gov.in/pddev/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

Colonial Period	1757 – 1947	Company and Crown courts; codification; hierarchy of courts	Modern court structure and procedural law
Post-Independence	1950 onwards	Constitutional courts; judicial review; independence of judiciary	Democratic legitimacy and rights-based justice
Digital & Smart Courts Era	2000s onwards	e-Courts, virtual hearings, AI tools, data analytics	Technology-enabled access to justice

I. ANCIENT INDIAN COURT SYSTEM

In ancient India, the concept of Dharma which included moral obligation, law, and upholding social order was inextricably linked to the administration of justice.⁸ Justice was seen as a vital part of community life and governance, not as a separate or independent duty like in contemporary court organisations. At the top of the legal system, the king, also known as the Raja, was considered the ultimate authority in charge of administering justice in conformity with Dharma.⁹ His position reflected the combination of political, legal, and ethical responsibilities by combining administrative control with moral accountability. The heterogeneous and decentralised character of Indian society was reflected in the diversity of judicial forums. While councils of ministers or Sabhas served as advisory judicial bodies on questions of governance, royal courts (Raja Kachahri) handled major criminal and civil problems. Guild courts (Shreni) frequently settled commercial and economic disputes, illustrating the early regulation of commerce and professional behaviour. Village assemblies, also known as Panchayats, were essential to local dispute resolution at the grassroots level, especially when it came to civil cases, family issues, and land disputes.¹⁰ Texts like the Manusmriti, Arthashastra of Kautilya, and other Dharmashastras, which outlined standards of evidence,¹¹ procedural norms, principles of punishment, and rules for judicial conduct, served as the codified foundation for these forums' operations. Interestingly, these systems acknowledged

⁸ admin, *Judiciary in Ancient India* » IILS Blog, IILS BLOG (Jan. 15, 2015), <https://www.iilsindia.com/blogs/judiciary-in-ancient-india/>.

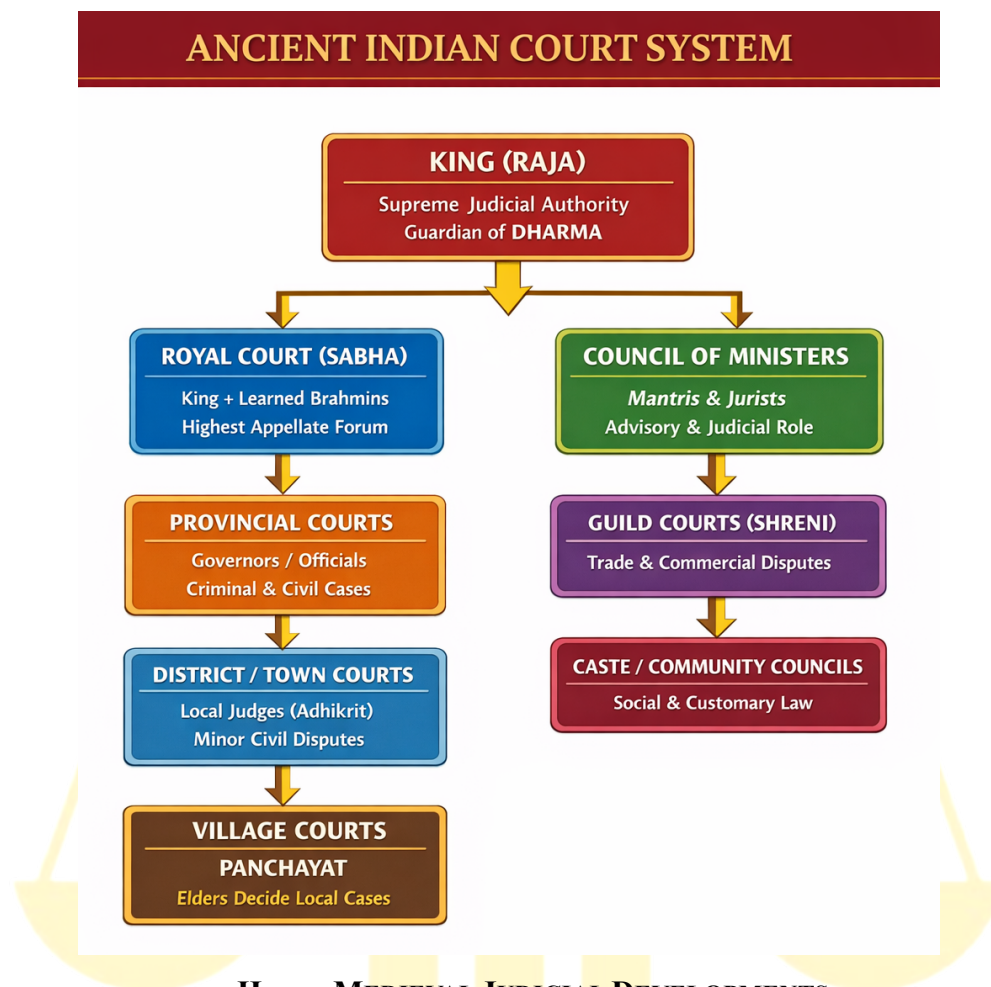
⁹ Prashant Kumar & Pramod Kumar Rajput, *Dharma, Rule of Law and the Indian Constitution: Ancient Foundations of Legal Order*, 7 IJFMR - INT. J. MULTIDISCIP. RES. (2025), <https://www.ijfmr.com/research-paper.php?id=59343>.

¹⁰ https://allahabadhighcourt.in/Event/TheIndianJudicialSystem_SSDhavan.Html, https://allahabadhighcourt.in/event/TheIndianJudicialSystem_SSDhavan.html (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

¹¹ Roger Boesche, *Kautilya's Arthashastra on War and Diplomacy in Ancient India*, 67 J. MIL. HIST. 9 (2003), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/29/article/40432>.

graded courts and appeal channels, demonstrating an early understanding of institutional hierarchy and the necessity of judicial checks and balances. The ancient Indian court system had many shortcomings and restrictions in spite of these advantages. Because the king's or the local elites' personal integrity and knowledge were crucial to the administration of justice, it was susceptible to nepotism, corruption, and arbitrary decision-making. Access to justice was significantly impacted by social hierarchies and caste differences; women and members of lower castes were among the marginalised groups that frequently experienced institutional discrimination and had little access to higher courts. Because the same legal concepts may be applied differently in different regions, guilds, or villages, the dependence on customary norms and local interpretations of Dharma occasionally resulted in discrepancies. Additionally, there were few written codifications and procedural formalities, which could lead to delays or subjective decisions, especially in complicated cases involving inheritance, property, or commerce. Ambiguities were also produced by the interaction between moral authority and the application of the law. Although Dharma placed a strong emphasis on justice, moral rectitude, and the well-being of society, its adaptability and context-dependency occasionally made it possible for political or personal prejudice to sway decisions.

Theoretically, there were appeals and graded courts, but their efficacy was based on the ruler's wealth and influence, so not all citizens always had equal access to justice. As a result, ancient Indian courts established the groundwork for hierarchical and institutionalised justice by becoming pioneers in the combination of ethics, law, and social government. However, their efficacy and homogeneity were constrained by their reliance on geographical variances, social stratification, and individual rulers. These flaws highlight the fact that, despite the ancient Indian legal system's philosophical depth and social embeddedness, it frequently failed to provide fair, impartial, and uniform justice throughout society.



II. MEDIEVAL JUDICIAL DEVELOPMENTS

The medieval period in India introduced significant structural changes to the judicial system with the establishment of Islamic rule.¹² Courts in the Delhi Sultanate and thereafter the Mughal Empire were centred on the Qazi, who decided cases mostly in accordance with Sharia law,¹³ although imperial decrees, administrative decrees, and regional traditions were also taken into consideration. During this time, a system with a more powerful central authority and established procedures replaced the more decentralised and community-based justice of the ancient past. The acceptance of legal plurality was a prominent aspect of the Mughal court system, especially during the reign of Emperor Akbar.¹⁴ Muslim decisions were made in accordance with Sharia, while

¹² *History of Indian Judiciary*, <https://www.lloydlawcollege.edu.in/blog/history-of-indian-judiciary.html> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

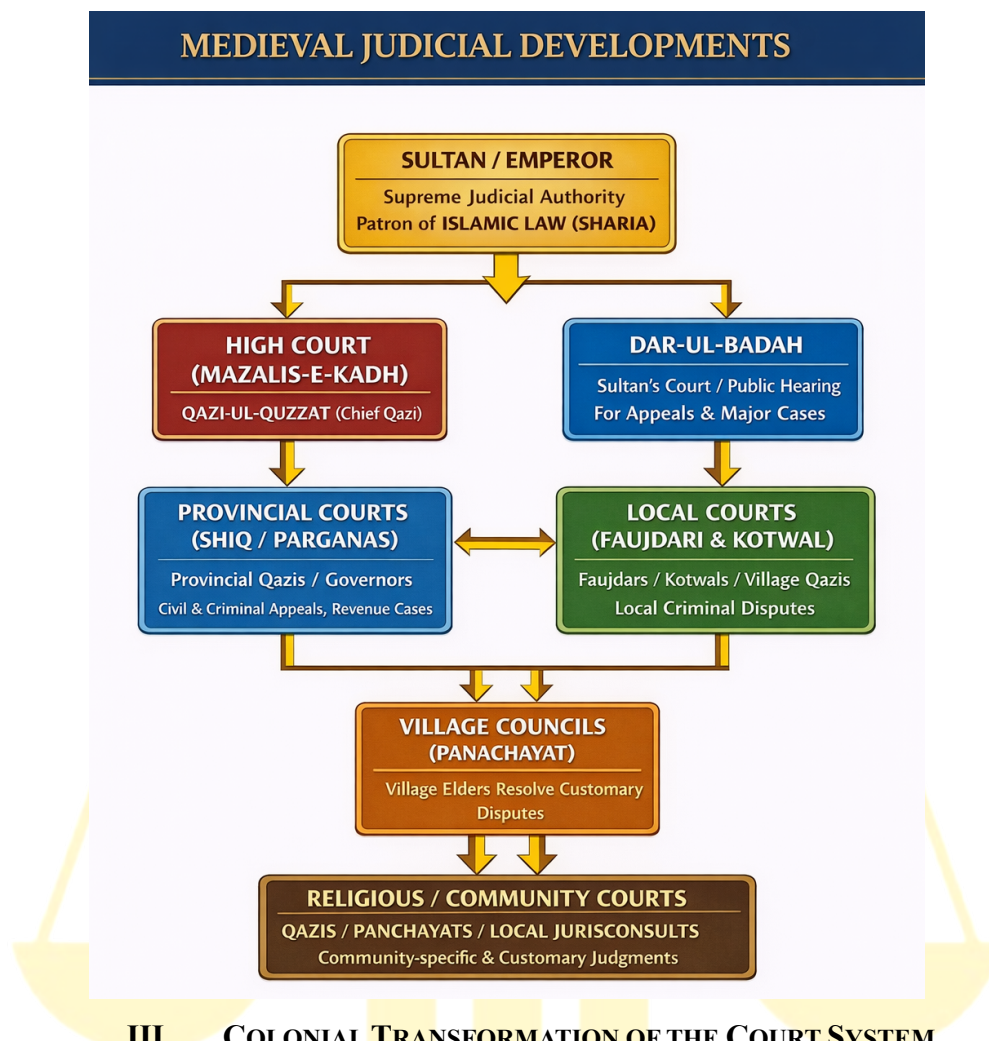
¹³ *Judicial System in Mughal India*, HISTORY MARG (Oct. 21, 2023), <https://www.historymarg.com/2023/10/judicial-system-in-mughal-india.html>.

¹⁴ *Akbar's Administrative System: Governance And Reforms Of The Mughal Empire* - PWOlyIAS, <https://pwoonlyias.com/udaan/akbar-administrative-system-mughal-empire/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

Hindu personal law remained to regulate issues like marriage, inheritance, and religious duties for Hindus.¹⁵ The Emperor himself served as the last arbiter, highlighting the combination of judicial supervision and centralised sovereignty. Formal record-keeping, such as written case records and administrative registers, improved decision-making uniformity and accountability and helped establish administrative regularity over large areas. Nevertheless, the mediaeval court system had a number of drawbacks and shortcomings despite these developments. Corruption, bias, and arbitrariness were allowed to flourish since judicial power was still largely reliant on the judgement and moral character of individual Qazis and provincial governors. Although essentially pluralistic, the cohabitation of several legal systems—Sharia, Hindu law, and customary practices—often led to problems and contradictions, particularly when parties from various legal communities or interreligious disputes were involved. Because imperial courts were far away, bureaucratically complicated, and occasionally scary, rural populations and marginalised groups often relied on local informal forums. Furthermore, although strengthening sovereignty, the Emperor's consolidation of appellate power may lead to political influence over court decisions, compromising impartiality. Depending on the effectiveness of local government and the collaboration of lower-level officials, the enforcement of judgements also differed significantly by location.¹⁶ Despite being progressive, the emphasis on written documents and literacy occasionally favoured the educated elite, making it more difficult for regular people to exercise their rights. The mediaeval court system essentially established crucial groundwork for formal adjudication and record-keeping by introducing increased structure, centralised oversight, and legal plurality. However, societal hierarchies, administrative discretion, and unequal access to justice hampered its efficacy, underscoring persistent difficulties in striking a balance between centralised authority and fair legal administration. These restrictions hinted to the additional codifications and reforms that would follow colonial administration.

¹⁵ *Judicial System of Mughal And British India*, مرکز سمٹ للدراسات (Sept. 12, 2019), <https://smtcenter.net/archives/slider/judicial-system-of-mughal-and-british-india>.

¹⁶ NEXT IAS Contributors, *Mughal Administration: Central, Provincial & Local*, (Nov. 6, 2024), <https://www.nextias.com/blog/mughal-administration/>.



III. COLONIAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE COURT SYSTEM

The establishment of British authority in India signalled a significant structural break in the judiciary's history.¹⁷ The colonial administration established a centralised, codified, and hierarchical judiciary that was intended to support the political and administrative goals of the colonial state, in contrast to earlier systems that had developed naturally over generations. The foundation for formal courts based on English law was established in the late seventeenth century with the creation of Mayor's Courts in the presidential towns of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. As a result of this development, the Indian High Courts Act of 1861 established the High Courts, combining the criminal, civil, and appellate courts into a single, cohesive body.

The colonial legal structure became characterised by codification. The Indian Penal Code (IPC), Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), and Indian Evidence Act (IEA) are examples of landmark

¹⁷ NEXT IAS Contributors, *Judicial System in British India: About, Development & More*, (July 1, 2025), <https://www.nextias.com/blog/judicial-system-in-british-india/>.

acts that standardised substantive and procedural law, bringing administrative efficiency, predictability, and consistency throughout the enormous colonial territory.¹⁸ The foundation for contemporary Indian jurisprudence was laid by these statutes, which established systematic guidelines for evidence, criminal culpability, trial processes, and judicial behaviour. These laws have been superseded by three new criminal laws in recent years: the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS)**, which replaced the IPC; the **Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNSS)**, which replaced the CrPC; and the **Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023 (BSA)**, which replaced the IEA. These changes, which go into effect on July 1, 2024,¹⁹ modernise India's criminal justice system by emphasising victim rights, rapid justice, procedural clarity, and technology-enabled courts.

Despite these successes, the colonial legal system had a number of serious flaws and shortcomings. Despite improving consistency, codification and centralisation frequently pushed indigenous legal traditions to the side of the colonial government's agenda. It was common for English-style legal reasoning to marginalise or subordinate local traditions, community-based conflict resolution, and customary norms that had long regulated civil and family concerns. Because colonial officials controlled appeal procedures and the higher courts were centred in metropolitan areas, access to justice remained unequal, with rural inhabitants and marginalised groups mostly relying on inferior courts with little resources.

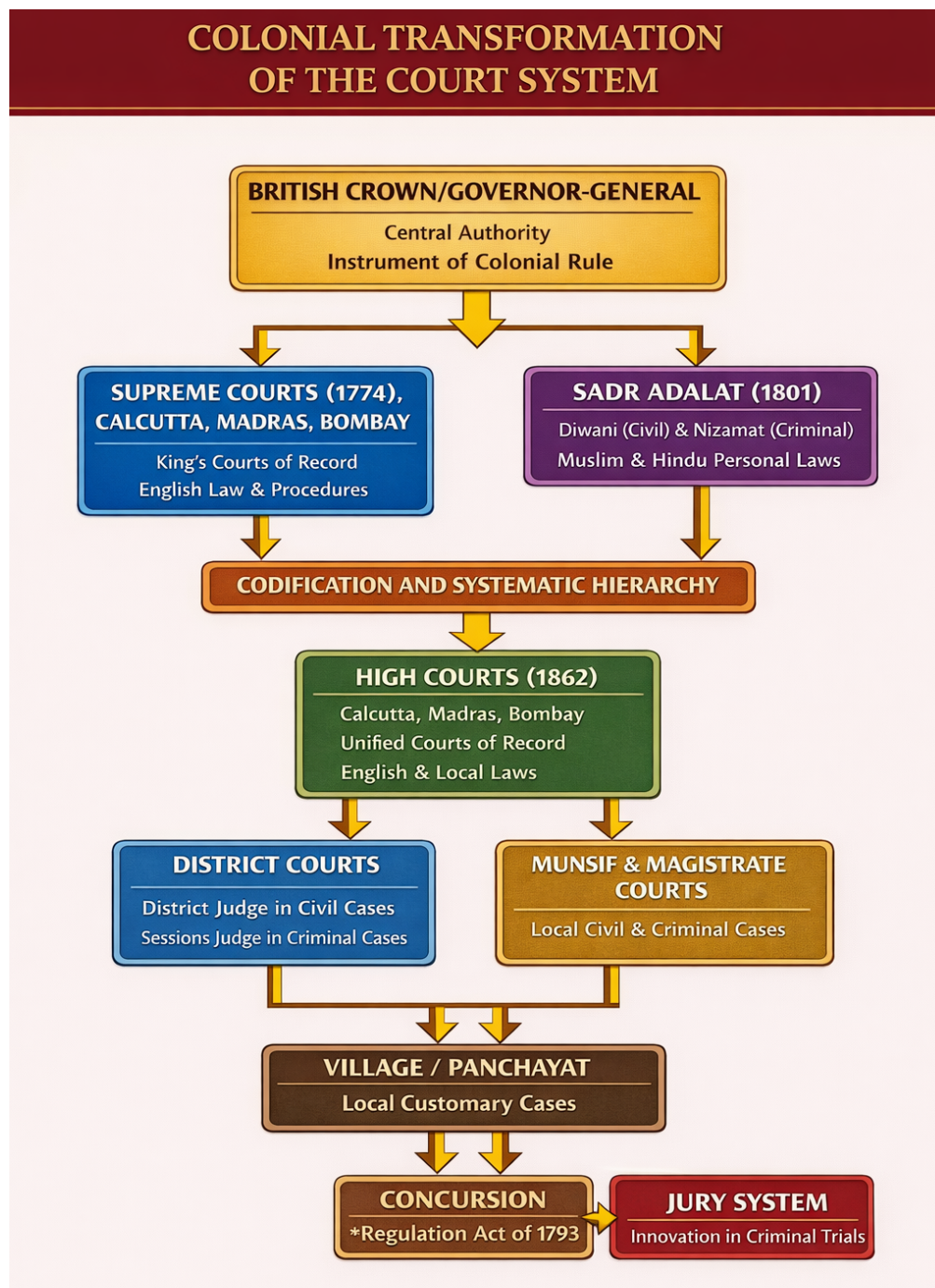
Furthermore, the court was used to further colonial goals, especially in areas of political control, public order, and income, even though it was officially independent. Ordinary litigants frequently suffered from prolonged trials, complicated legal terminology, and documentation requirements due to procedural rigidity and formality. Although colonial law established a framework for predictability, its dependence on English legal ideas occasionally caused alienation from the actual realities of Indian society, and it failed to adequately address socioeconomic inequities or provide fair access to justice.

As a result, the British judicial system in India established the architectural framework for modern courts by laying the groundwork for codified law, hierarchical adjudication, and modern legal institutions. The conflict between formal legal order and substantive justice, which has been

¹⁸ JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), *IPC vs CrPC: Key Differences and Full Forms Explained*, SITE NAME, I.E. JAIN (DEEMED-TO-BE UNIVERSITY), <https://www.jainuniversity.ac.in/blogs/ipc-vs-crpc> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

¹⁹ *BHARATIYA NYAYA SANHITA IN PLACE OF INDIAN PENAL CODE*, <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2115169> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

attempted to resolve by later reforms, including post-independence attempts to democratise and modernise the judiciary, is highlighted by its drawbacks, which include the marginalisation of indigenous practices, unequal access, and administrative bias.



IV. POST-INDEPENDENCE CONSTITUTIONAL JUDICIARY

With India's independence in 1947, the nation undertook the formidable task of transforming the colonial judicial apparatus into a constitutional judiciary rooted in the principles of popular

sovereignty and democratic governance.²⁰ The adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950 established a comprehensive framework for judicial organization, delineating the Supreme Court as the apex authority empowered with judicial review,²¹ the enforcement of fundamental rights, and the interpretation of constitutional provisions. High Courts in each state and subordinate courts at the district and taluk levels were integrated into a single hierarchical judicial structure, designed to ensure consistency, accountability, and the rule of law across the country.

Key principles such as judicial independence, separation of powers, and access to justice became central to the functioning of the judiciary. The post-independence period witnessed remarkable innovations, including the development of Public Interest Litigation (PIL), which enabled marginalized groups, NGOs, and concerned citizens to approach the courts directly to seek remedies for social injustices, environmental degradation, human rights violations, and administrative failures. This judicial activism positioned the courts as central actors in governance and social reform, often filling gaps left by legislative or executive inaction.

However, alongside these achievements, the post-independence judicial system has faced significant challenges and failures. The growing caseload has led to chronic delays, with millions of cases pending across various levels of courts, undermining the ideal of timely justice. Access to justice, though constitutionally guaranteed, remains unequal, particularly for economically and socially disadvantaged communities who struggle with high legal costs, language barriers, and procedural complexity. Judicial independence, while formally protected, occasionally faces pressures from political actors, public opinion, or media scrutiny, creating a delicate balance between activism and restraint.

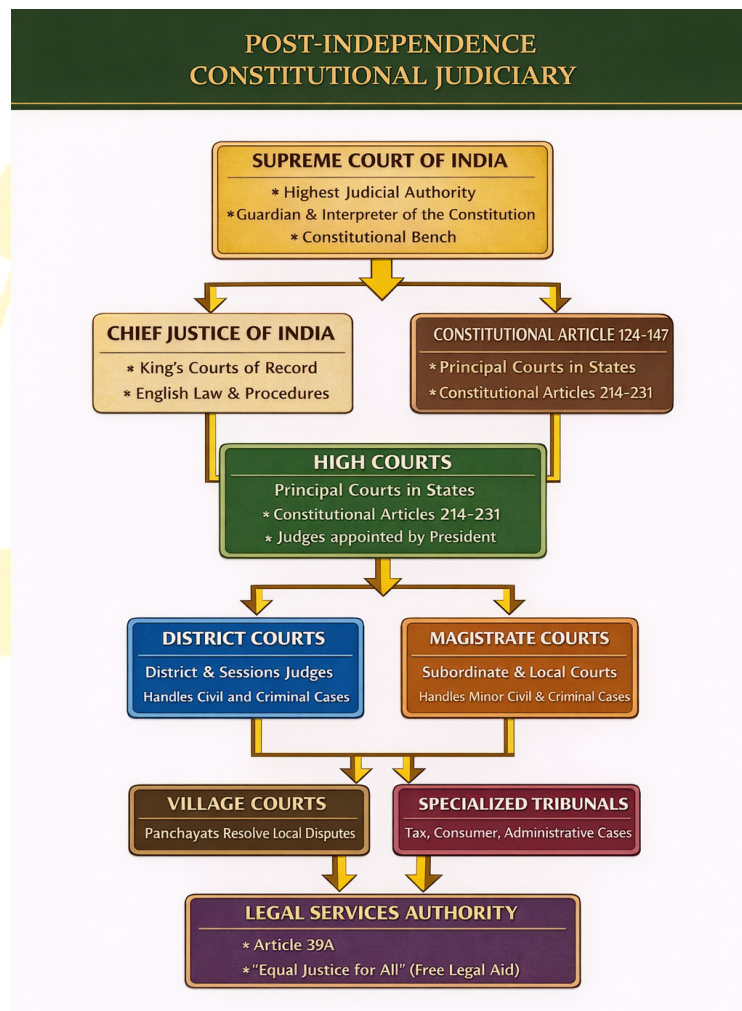
The judiciary's expansive role in social reform through PILs has also drawn criticism for potential overreach, where courts, in interpreting constitutional mandates, may intervene in matters traditionally within the executive or legislative domain. Furthermore, procedural formalism inherited from the colonial era sometimes limits efficiency, while technological adoption has been uneven, restricting the benefits of digitization and e-justice in remote or rural areas.²²

²⁰ *How India's Judiciary Tried to Shape Its Own Independence*, SUPREME COURT OBSERVER, <https://www.scobserver.in/journal/how-indias-judiciary-tried-to-shape-its-own-independence/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

²¹ Rohit Sarma, *Judicial Powerplay: Independence of Judiciary under the Shadow of Illiberalism*, 9 INDIAN LAW REV. 109 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/24730580.2025.2496016>.

²² Medha Srivastava, *When the Judiciary Undermines Judicial Independence*, VERFASSUNGSBLOG (2019), <https://verfassungsblog.de/when-the-judiciary-undermines-judicial-independence/>.

Thus, the post-independence judiciary represents a remarkable evolution from colonial structures, integrating constitutional values, legal pluralism, and a commitment to social justice. Yet, it continues to confront structural, procedural, and access-related challenges. These limitations underscore the need for continual reform, technological integration, and institutional strengthening trends exemplified by the recent initiatives to establish Smart Courts, digital case management systems, and technology-driven adjudication processes that aim to enhance efficiency, transparency, and inclusivity in India's contemporary judicial landscape.



IV. DIGITAL COURTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF SMART COURTS

The Indian court system underwent a significant transition in the late 20th and early 21st centuries,²³ with a paradigm shift towards digital justice.²⁴ The Government of India launched the e-Courts Project as part of the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) in response to the ongoing challenges of case backlogs, delays, and restricted accessibility.²⁵ Through the digitisation of case records, e-filing of petitions, online access to cause lists and judgements, and real-time updates for litigants and attorneys, this project sought to employ technology to modernise judicial administration. The foundation for a more open, effective, and responsible judiciary was established by the e-Courts Project, which simplified case administration and decreased reliance on paper records.²⁶

Expanding upon this basis, the idea of Smart Courts surfaced as the next-generation judicial paradigm, signifying India's advanced state of digital transformation. Artificial intelligence (AI) is included into Smart Courts to help with workflow optimisation, case allocation, and prioritisation, which helps courts better handle backlogs. Court procedures are streamlined, procedural bottlenecks are located, and case durations are predicted using predictive analytics. By eliminating the need for travel and lowering related expenses, virtual hearings—which are made feasible by video conferencing and cloud-based platforms—increase individuals' access to justice in rural or underdeveloped locations.

The use of blockchain technology to protect court documents, guaranteeing immutability, transparency, and verifiable provenance of case files, judgements, and orders, is a noteworthy advance in Smart Courts. Evidence-based decision-making at the operational and policy levels is also made easier by data-driven judicial administration, which makes it possible to gather and analyse performance indicators, case trends, and workload allocation. By tackling persistent obstacles like expense, lengthy processing times, and geographical inaccessibility, these technologies together seek to democratise justice.

²³ OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION, *Supreme Court Embraces AI to Deliver 21st Century Process Reforms*, ORFONLINE.ORG, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/supreme-court-embraces-ai-to-deliver-21st-century-process-reforms-66417> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

²⁴ *Digital Courts: Future of The Indian Legal System*, (Oct. 9, 2025), <https://www.lexisnexis.com/blogs/in-legal/b/law/posts/digital-courts-future-of-the-indian-legal-system>.

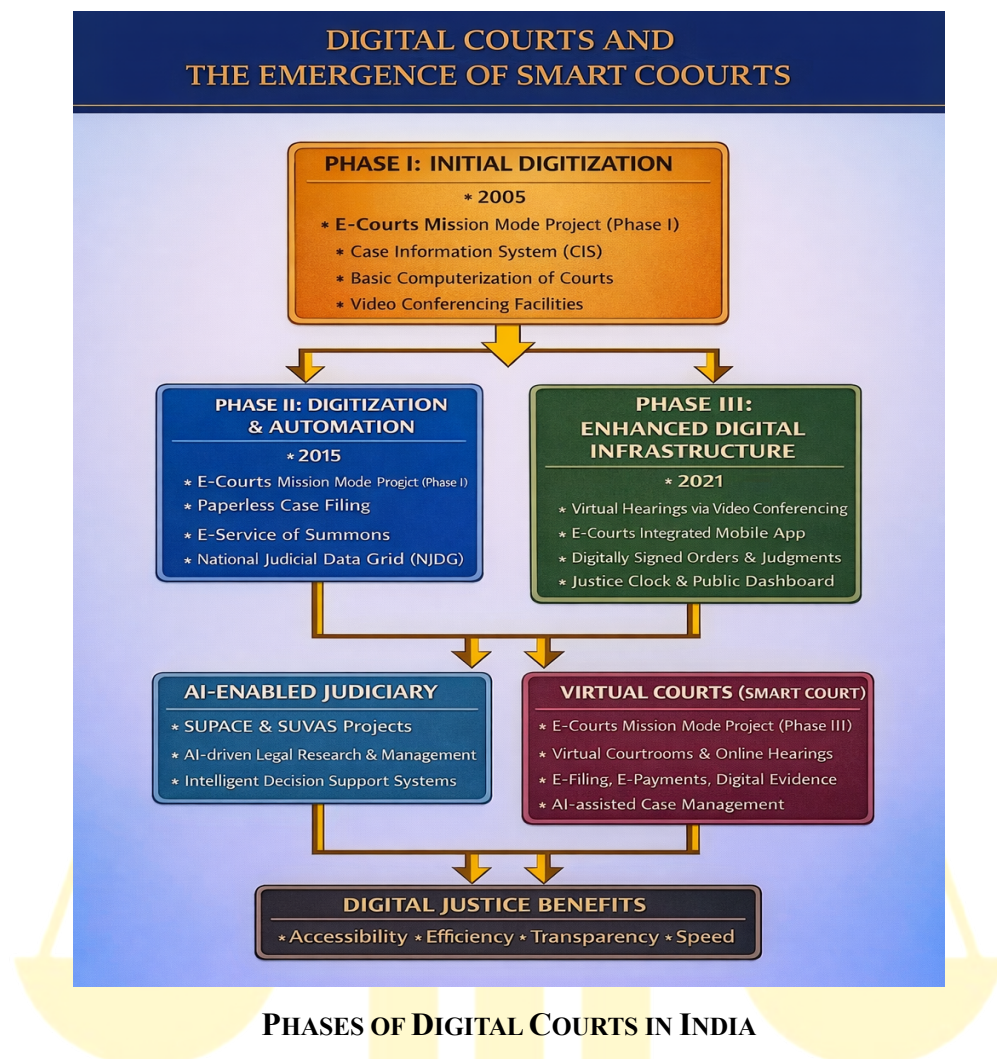
²⁵ *E-Courts Mission Mode Project | Official Website of e-Committee, Supreme Court of India | India*, <https://ecommitteesci.gov.in/project/brief-overview-of-e-courts-project/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

²⁶ *E-Courts in India – GKToday*, <https://www.gktoday.in/e-courts-in-india/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

However, there are obstacles and restrictions associated with the deployment of Smart Courts. Strong digital infrastructure is required due to the dependence on technology, yet it may not be equally accessible in rural and metropolitan areas. The inclusion of e-justice projects may be impacted by issues including data privacy, cybersecurity threats, digital literacy,²⁷ and fair access to devices. Additionally, even if AI and predictive technologies increase productivity, they also bring up concerns about algorithmic accountability, transparency, and potential bias in judicial decision-making. Human judgement, empathy, and context-sensitive interpretation are still crucial, necessitating a careful balancing act between automation and human supervision.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, India's legal system has undergone a significant transformation with the introduction of Smart Courts, which embody not just an administrative change but also a revolutionary conception of justice. Smart Courts, which combine technology with constitutional guarantees of equality, transparency, and access to justice, are a prime example of how Indian adjudication has continued to adapt from ancient Dharma-based principles to contemporary digital governance, highlighting the judiciary's enduring ability to change in response to both societal demands and technological advancements.

²⁷ *The Importance of Digital Literacy in Cyber Security*, <https://aken.com.br/en/digital-literacy-in-cybersecurity/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).



1. Preliminary Computerization Phase (Late 1990s – Early 2000s)

The first phase of digital intervention focused on the basic computerization of court operations. Case record maintenance and administrative registers began to be digitized in select metropolitan courts, and basic software was introduced for case indexing, scheduling, and record-keeping. Pilot programs in states such as Karnataka and Delhi tested electronic case tracking systems.²⁸

Limitations

Infrastructure was limited, connectivity was poor, and most operations still relied on manual registers. Technology adoption was primarily administrative, not procedural.

2. e-Courts Phase (2005 – 2015)

The e-Courts Project, launched in 2005 as part of the National e-Governance Plan, marked the formal institutionalization of digital justice. Key features included the computerization of District

²⁸ Phase-III | Department of Justice | India, <https://doj.gov.in/phase-iii/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

and Subordinate Courts, enabling e-filing of petitions, online access to cause lists and judgments, and integration with state judicial portals for monitoring case pendency.²⁹

Achievements

Increased administrative efficiency, reduced reliance on physical records, and improved public access to court schedules and case status.

Challenges/Failures

Limited coverage, especially in rural courts; minimal automation in judicial decision-making; lack of uniformity in software systems across states.

3. Virtual Courts Phase (2015 – 2020)

The Virtual Courts initiative aimed to enhance remote access to justice. Features included video conferencing for hearings, remote filing of documents, and pilot programs for hybrid proceedings blending physical and virtual hearings.

Achievements

Reduced travel costs and delays for litigants and allowed faster resolution of certain civil and traffic cases.

Challenges/Failures

Dependence on reliable internet connectivity, especially in rural areas; uneven digital literacy among lawyers and litigants; limited integration with existing case management systems.

4. Smart Court Phase (2020 – Present)

Smart Courts represent the most advanced stage of digital transformation, integrating AI for case allocation, predictive analytics for backlog management, blockchain-based record security, end-to-end e-case management, virtual hearings, and cloud-based infrastructure. Data-driven administration supports metrics-based evaluation of judicial performance, workload optimization, and policy planning.

Achievements

Streamlines court operations, improves efficiency, democratizes access to justice by reducing costs and geographic barriers, and enhances transparency and accountability.³⁰

²⁹ *eCourts Project Implemented by Department of Justice in Collaboration with eCommittee Supreme Court of India*, <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2078398> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

³⁰ *Indian Courts and E-Governance Initiative | Vikaspedia - Digital Governance*, <https://egovernance.vikaspedia.in/viewcontent/e-governance/online-legal-services/indian-courts-and-e-governance-initiative?lgn=en> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

Challenges/Failures

Digital infrastructure gaps in remote areas, cybersecurity and data privacy concerns, potential algorithmic bias in AI-assisted case management, and the need to balance automation with human judicial discretion.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The mission of India's digital courts is to create a completely integrated, cutting-edge legal system. This includes full integration with national legal databases, which facilitates easy information exchange between courts at all levels and guarantees that case data, rulings, and records are current and available to everyone. It is anticipated that AI-assisted legal research and judgement writing would promote efficiency in managing complicated cases, improve consistency in decision-making, and drastically decrease the court burden. Meanwhile, the growth of mobile-based e-court services seeks to break down socioeconomic and geographic obstacles to justice, especially for litigants in underserved or rural areas.³¹ Additionally, by standardising protocols, software, and processes across all states and courts, National Legal Tech Standards will promote consistency, interoperability, and dependability throughout the digital judicial ecosystem. In conclusion, the development of digital courts in India has gone through five main stages: preliminary computerisation, e-Courts, Virtual Courts,³² Smart Courts, and the next phase of future digital integration. Every stage has gradually improved accessibility, efficiency, and transparency while also exposing shortcomings in terms of infrastructure, inclusion, and the moral use of technology. Taken together, these developments have shaped the Indian judiciary's continuous development.

CONCLUSION

The Indian court system's development reveals a striking balance between continuity and adaptability, demonstrating the judiciary's unwavering dedication to societal legitimacy, justice, and equity. Every stage demonstrates the courts' capacity to adapt to shifting social, political, and technical settings, from the ancient courts based on Dharma to the pluralistic and codified institutions of the mediaeval and colonial eras to the constitutional judiciary of independent India. The most recent development in this historical trend is the rise of digital courts and smart courts,

³¹ *Home - eCourt India High Courts Services*, <https://hcservices.ecourts.gov.in/hcservices/main.php> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

³² *Virtual Courts | Home*, <https://vcourts.gov.in/virtualcourt/> (last visited Dec. 28, 2025).

which combine cutting-edge technologies like AI, predictive analytics, blockchain, and virtual hearings to improve efficiency, transparency, and access to justice. Crucially, Smart Courts are a modern manifestation of the same timeless ideas that have governed Indian adjudication for millennia rather than a departure from tradition. The judiciary continues to strike a balance between power and equity, procedural rigour and accessibility, and innovation and human judgement by translating constitutional ideals into a digital framework. A model of judicial evolution that balances tradition with the needs of a contemporary, digital society, the Indian court system's transition from Dharma-based assemblies to technologically advanced Smart Courts highlights its adaptability, resilience, and unwavering commitment to the rule of law.

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