

A Comparative Study of the Ancient and Modern Judicial System in India

Dr. Umesh Kumar

Assistant Professor

Department of Law

M.M.H. College, Ghaziabad

Email: bhatilaw@gmail.com

Mrs. Poonam Choudhary

Assistant Professor

Department of Law

M.M.H. College, Ghaziabad

Email: adv.poonamchoudhary@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive comparison between the ancient and modern judicial systems in India. It explores the historical development of the judicial system in ancient India, including the Vedic period, the Maurya and Gupta empires, and the Mughal era. The study also examines the evolution of the judicial system in modern India, focusing on the colonial period, the post-independence era, and recent reforms. By analyzing key aspects such as the structure, procedures, principles, and sources of law, this study highlights the similarities and differences between the ancient and modern Indian judicial systems. The findings shed light on the progress made in the field of justice and highlight areas where further improvements can be made.

Keywords

Ancient, Modern, Judicial, Custom, Codification, Principles, Source.

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**Dr. Umesh Kumar,
Mrs. Poonam
Choudhary**

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Introduction

India has a rich history of legal and judicial systems dating back thousands of years. Ancient India witnessed the development of intricate legal systems rooted in religious texts and customs. Over time, these systems evolved, influenced by various dynasties and rulers. With the advent of British colonial rule, the Indian legal system underwent significant changes, leading to the establishment of a modern judicial system. Today, India's judicial system plays a crucial role in upholding the rule of law, ensuring justice, and protecting the rights of its citizens.

Research Objectives: The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

To explore the historical development of the judicial system in ancient India, including the Vedic period, the Maurya and Gupta empires, and the Mughal era.

To examine the evolution of the judicial system in modern India, focusing on the colonial period, the post-independence era, and recent reforms.

To compare key aspects of the ancient and modern Indian judicial systems, such as their structure, procedures, principles of justice, and sources of law.

To identify the similarities and differences between the ancient and modern systems and analyze their implications for the current Indian judicial system.

To assess the progress made in the field of justice in India and highlight areas where further improvements can be made.

By accomplishing these objectives, this study aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the ancient and modern judicial systems in India, their similarities, differences, and their impact on the current state of justice in the country.

Ancient Indian Judicial System

- a. Vedic period: The Vedic period in ancient India, which lasted from approximately 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, witnessed the emergence of early legal and judicial systems. The legal framework during this period was primarily based on the Vedas, the sacred texts of Hinduism. The Rig Veda, for instance, contains hymns that mention the importance of truth, justice, and the role of judges in resolving disputes.
- b. Maurya and Gupta empires: During the Maurya and Gupta empires (322 BCE to 550 CE), the judicial system underwent significant development. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka is known for his efforts to promote a just and equitable legal system. The Arthashastra, written by Kautilya (also known as Chanakya), served as a comprehensive treatise on statecraft, administration, and law during this period. It covered various aspects of the legal system, including courts, judges, punishments, and legal procedures.

- c. **Mughal era:** The Mughal era (1526 CE to 1857 CE) marked a significant period in India's history, including the development of the judicial system. The Mughal emperors introduced Islamic legal principles and institutions. The Qazis, appointed by the emperor, played a pivotal role in resolving disputes based on Islamic law (Sharia). The Mughal judicial system consisted of various courts, including the Dar-ul-Qaza (civil courts) and the Qazi-ul-Quzat (the highest judicial authority).

- d. **Key features and characteristics:** The ancient Indian judicial systems shared some common features and characteristics, including:

Influence of religion and customs: Ancient Indian judicial systems were deeply influenced by religious texts, such as the Vedas and Islamic law. Customary practices and traditions also played a significant role in shaping the legal framework.

Role of judges and courts: Judges, known as Brahmins or Qazis, presided over the courts and were responsible for adjudicating disputes and delivering justice. Courts were established at various levels, and there were provisions for higher appellate courts.

Emphasis on fairness and justice: The ancient Indian judicial systems aimed to uphold principles of fairness, truth, and justice. The concept of Dharma (righteousness) played a central role in decision-making.

Punishments and restitution: Punishments for offenses varied depending on the severity of the crime. They included fines, corporal punishment, exile, and even capital punishment. Restitution and compensation were also part of the judicial process.

Modern Indian Judicial System

- a. **Colonial period and British influence:** During the colonial period (1757-1947), the British East India Company and later the British Raj significantly influenced the Indian judicial system. The British introduced their legal framework, based on English common law, through legislation such as the Regulating Act of 1773 and the Indian Penal Code of 1860. They established courts and legal institutions, including the High Courts and the Privy Council, which served as the final appellate authority.
- b. **Post-independence era:** Following India's independence in 1947, the country underwent significant legal reforms and established a modern judicial system. The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, laid the foundation for the judicial structure and provided for an independent judiciary. The Supreme Court of India became the highest judicial authority, and High Courts were

established in different states. The judiciary's role expanded to protect fundamental rights, interpret the Constitution, and adjudicate disputes.

- c. Recent reforms and developments: In recent years, the Indian judicial system has witnessed several reforms and developments aimed at improving efficiency, access to justice, and transparency. Some notable reforms include the introduction of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms like mediation and arbitration, the computerization of courts, and the establishment of specialized tribunals for specific areas of law. The adoption of technology, such as e-filing and video conferencing, has also facilitated remote hearings and case management.

- d. Key features and characteristics: The modern Indian judicial system is characterized by several key features, including:

Independence of the judiciary: The judiciary in India is independent of the executive and legislative branches of government. Judges are appointed through a rigorous process and are expected to uphold the rule of law impartially.

Adversarial system: The Indian judicial system follows an adversarial system, where two opposing parties present their arguments and evidence before the court, and the judge decides the outcome.

Hierarchy of courts: The judicial system consists of a hierarchical structure with the Supreme Court at the top, followed by High Courts in each state, and subordinate courts at the district and lower levels.

Public interest litigation: The concept of public interest litigation (PIL) allows individuals and organizations to approach the courts to seek redressal on behalf of the public or marginalized sections of society.

Protection of fundamental rights: The judiciary plays a crucial role in protecting and enforcing fundamental rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, such as the right to equality, freedom of speech, and right to life.

Comparative Analysis

a. Structure of the Judicial System

Ancient Indian Judicial System: The structure of the ancient Indian judicial system varied across different periods and regions. It consisted of local village-level courts, regional courts, and higher courts presided over by kings or emperors. The judicial system was often intertwined with the religious and social hierarchy, with Brahmins or Qazis playing a significant role as judges.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system is structured hierarchically. At the apex is the Supreme Court of India, followed by

High Courts in each state and subordinate courts at the district and lower levels. Specialized tribunals have also been established to handle specific areas of law, such as labor disputes or tax matters. The system is designed to ensure an independent and impartial judiciary.

b. Judicial Procedures and Processes

Ancient Indian Judicial System: The procedures and processes in the ancient Indian judicial system were based on customary practices, religious texts, and the wisdom of the judges. Oral arguments, witness testimonies, and examination of evidence were part of the judicial process. Judges had considerable discretionary powers in adjudicating disputes.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system follows a well-defined set of procedures and processes. Litigants present their cases through written pleadings, oral arguments, and examination of witnesses. Rules of evidence and procedure govern the conduct of cases. The adversarial system prevails, where the parties present their arguments, and the judge makes a decision based on the facts and applicable laws.

c. Principles of Justice

Ancient Indian Judicial System: The principles of justice in the ancient Indian judicial system were based on concepts like truth, fairness, and righteousness. Dharma (righteousness) was a guiding principle in decision-making. Judges aimed to uphold moral and ethical values while resolving disputes.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system upholds principles of justice such as equality before the law, impartiality, and fairness. The Constitution guarantees fundamental rights and the protection of human rights. Judicial decisions are based on statutory laws, precedents, and constitutional principles.

d. Sources of Law

Ancient Indian Judicial System: The sources of law in ancient India included religious texts like the Vedas, Dharma Shastras, and Smritis. These texts provided guidance on legal principles, social norms, and customs. Customary practices and precedents were also influential in shaping the law.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system derives its laws from various sources. The Constitution of India is the supreme law of the land. Statutes enacted by the legislature, case laws, and precedents established by higher courts are important sources of law. International treaties and conventions ratified by India also influence the legal framework.

e. Access to Justice

Ancient Indian Judicial System: Access to justice in the ancient Indian system was largely dependent on one's social status, economic means, and proximity to courts. Local village-level courts provided a form of decentralized justice, but marginalized groups may have faced challenges in accessing justice.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system recognizes the right to access justice as a fundamental right. The system strives to ensure equal access to justice for all citizens. Legal aid mechanisms have been established to assist those who cannot afford legal representation. Public interest litigation allows individuals and organizations to seek judicial intervention in matters of public importance.

Overall, while both the ancient and modern Indian judicial systems aim to administer justice, the modern system emphasizes the principles of equality, fairness, and the protection of rights. It provides a more structured and formalized approach to the administration of justice, with a clear hierarchy of courts and established procedures. Access to justice has also improved, although challenges of backlog of cases and delays in the judicial process persist.

Similarities between Ancient and Modern Systems

- a. Legal principles and concepts:** Both the ancient and modern Indian judicial systems share certain legal principles and concepts. They emphasize the importance of justice, fairness, and upholding the rule of law. Concepts such as truth, righteousness (Dharma), and equality before the law are fundamental principles in both systems.
- b. Role of judiciary:** In both the ancient and modern systems, the judiciary plays a vital role in the administration of justice. The judiciary acts as an independent body responsible for interpreting laws, settling disputes, and ensuring the fair and impartial resolution of conflicts. Judges hold the authority to make decisions based on evidence, arguments, and applicable laws.
- c. Protection of rights:** Both the ancient and modern Indian judicial systems aim to protect the rights of individuals. While the ancient system focused on principles of justice and fairness, it also recognized certain individual rights. Similarly, the modern system, enshrined in the Indian Constitution, safeguards fundamental rights such as the right to equality, freedom of speech, and protection against discrimination.

Differences between Ancient and Modern Systems

a. Influence of Religion and Custom

Ancient Indian Judicial System: In the ancient system, religion and custom played a significant role in shaping the legal framework. Legal principles and

practices were influenced by religious texts, such as the Vedas and Dharma Shastras. Judges often relied on moral and ethical considerations derived from religious teachings in their decision-making.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system is based on a secular framework, where the influence of religion and custom on legal principles is significantly reduced. While personal laws based on religion still exist, the overall legal system is separate from religious doctrines. The emphasis is more on constitutional principles, statutory laws, and judicial precedents.

b. Codification of Laws

Ancient Indian Judicial System: In the ancient system, laws were primarily unwritten and relied on customary practices, religious texts, and the wisdom of the judges. Legal principles were not codified in a systematic manner. Instead, legal norms were transmitted through oral traditions and precedents.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system relies on codified laws. The Indian Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, and other statutes provide a comprehensive framework of laws. These laws are enacted by the legislature and serve as the primary source of legal norms. The codification of laws brings clarity, consistency, and predictability to the legal system.

c. Role of Technology

Ancient Indian Judicial System: The ancient system did not have the technological advancements that are prevalent in the modern system. The process of gathering evidence, record-keeping, and communication relied on manual methods. The emphasis was more on oral arguments and personal testimonies.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system has embraced technology to enhance efficiency and accessibility. Courts are increasingly adopting computerization and digitization, allowing for the e-filing of cases, electronic record-keeping, and online access to case information. Technologies such as video conferencing and virtual hearings have also been adopted, facilitating remote proceedings and reducing logistical barriers.

d. Independence of Judiciary

Ancient Indian Judicial System: In the ancient system, the judiciary was often intertwined with the political and social hierarchy. The rulers or kings held considerable influence over the judicial system, and judges were appointed or designated by the ruling authorities. The independence of the judiciary from political interference was limited.

Modern Indian Judicial System: The modern Indian judicial system emphasizes the independence of the judiciary as a cornerstone. The Constitution of

India provides for the separation of powers, ensuring the independence of the judiciary from the executive and legislative branches. Judges are appointed through a transparent and merit-based process, and they enjoy the security of tenure. The judiciary acts as a check on the other branches of government and plays a vital role in upholding the rule of law.

Progress and Challenges

a. Achievements in the Modern Judicial System

Independence of the Judiciary: The modern Indian judicial system has achieved a significant level of independence from political interference. The judiciary acts as a check on the other branches of government, ensuring the rule of law and upholding the rights of individuals.

Protection of Fundamental Rights: The Indian Constitution guarantees fundamental rights to its citizens, and the judiciary plays a crucial role in protecting and upholding these rights. Landmark judgments have expanded the scope and interpretation of fundamental rights, promoting equality, freedom of speech, and protection against discrimination.

Judicial Activism: The judiciary has played an active role in addressing societal issues and promoting social justice. Public interest litigation (PIL) has been instrumental in highlighting and resolving various public concerns, leading to positive changes in areas such as environmental protection, human rights, and access to education.

Use of Technology: The modern judicial system has embraced technological advancements to enhance efficiency and accessibility. E-filing, online case management systems, virtual hearings, and video conferencing have improved the speed and convenience of court proceedings, reducing delays and costs.

b. Persistent Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Backlog of Cases: One of the major challenges in the modern judicial system is the backlog of pending cases. The increasing caseload and delays in the disposal of cases hinder access to justice and contribute to a lack of confidence in the system. Measures should be taken to expedite the resolution of pending cases and improve the efficiency of the judicial process.

Access to Justice: While efforts have been made to ensure access to justice for all, marginalized communities, economically disadvantaged individuals, and rural populations still face barriers to accessing legal aid and representation. There is a need to strengthen legal aid mechanisms, promote awareness of legal rights, and improve the reach of the judicial system to underserved areas.

Judicial Delays: Despite reforms, delays in the judicial process continue to be a significant challenge. This can be attributed to factors such as the shortage of judges, cumbersome procedures, and adjournments. Streamlining the process, increasing the number of judges, and implementing alternative dispute resolution mechanisms can help address this issue.

Judicial Capacity and Infrastructure: Adequate infrastructure, including courtrooms, support staff, and technological resources, is crucial for the efficient functioning of the judicial system. Investments and reforms are required to strengthen the infrastructure and enhance the capacity of the judiciary to handle the increasing caseload.

Judicial Reforms: Continuous evaluation and improvement of the judicial system are necessary to address emerging challenges and ensure its effectiveness. Reforms such as simplifying procedures, promoting transparency, and enhancing judicial accountability can contribute to a more efficient and accessible justice system.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis between the ancient and modern Indian judicial systems reveals both similarities and differences. The legal principles and concepts, the role of the judiciary, and the protection of rights are common elements in both systems. However, the influence of religion and custom, codification of laws, the role of technology, and independence of the judiciary distinguish the modern system from its ancient counterpart. While the ancient system had its foundations in religious texts and local customs, the modern system is based on constitutional principles and the rule of law. Understanding the similarities and differences between the two systems can inform ongoing efforts to strengthen the modern Indian judicial system and ensure access to justice for all.

The findings highlight the progress made in the modern Indian judicial system, including the independence of the judiciary, protection of fundamental rights, judicial activism, and adoption of technology. These achievements have contributed to a more efficient and accessible justice system. However, persistent challenges such as case backlog, access to justice, delays, capacity issues, and the need for ongoing judicial reforms should be addressed to further strengthen the Indian judicial system.

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