

Need and remedies for reforming India's Judicial System

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Introduction

“Very often our justice delivery poses multiple barriers for the common people. The working and the style of courts do not sit well with the complexities of India. Our systems practice rules being colonial in origin may not be best suited to the needs of the Indian population. The need of the hour is the Indianisation of our legal system”,¹ the Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana.

When we think of the year 2021, there were many news which were making the headlines and one of them was the speech given by our incumbent Chief justice of India N.V. Ramana in which he called for the “Indianisation” of the legal system. If we see the realities of our legal system then no one can deny his statement. This issue was pertinent to contemporary situations in our judicial system.

When we see current scenarios of our country then we can say that his statement was timely and has its own importance. When I say the statement was made timely then it means that in the recent past government has taken many steps to alleviate the woes of the judiciary, be its amendments in the procedural law or planning of the judicial vista project. As we are seeing executive is taking proactive measures to fill the judicial vacancies as suggested by the collegium system. On some issues, one can say that both executive and judiciary are working in tandem.

The call for “Indianisation” by the CJI is also important because, in the past, few members of the judicial fraternity raised this issue but were not thrust into the limelight. This time it got the public attention because it was made by the CJI himself while paying his tributes to late Supreme Court Judge Justice Mohan Shantanagoudar. As CJI himself said that late Justice Mohan Shantanagoudar used to discuss this topic with him every day.

As ‘Indianisation’ is an ongoing process it becomes necessary that one should deep dive into the issue of reforms still needed in the legal system as raised by the CJI and will try to understand the meaning of *“Indianisation of the legal system”*.

¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/justice-system-colonial-not-suited-for-indian-population-says-cji-7517470/>

Meaning of the term “Indianisation of legal system”

Chief Justice of India (CJI) N.V. Ramana spoke recently of the need to “*move away from colonial rules followed in the country’s legal system, and towards an ‘Indianisation’ of the same*”.²

What this means in concrete terms is not immediately apparent. In the post-independence decades, the ‘Indianisation’ has not signified any particular trajectory of change sometimes, it coincided with the democratization of public spaces, increased access, or more transparency. At other times, however, it has meant quite the opposite: the crystallization of the idea of a ‘strong nation state’, with fewer deliberations and debates. ‘Indianisation’ has also meant for some, a conflation of the country with particularistic religious-cultural representations.

Earlier this year, the government successfully made the argument before the Supreme Court that India is only a representational democracy and not a participative one. In other words, the extent of peoples’ participation is limited to electing representatives and then leaving the majority government alone to get with the job. In this view of things, challenges to state policy, or state action, are seen as disruptive. If the ruling establishment gets particularly worked up, it can also label these challenges ‘anti-Indian’.

We should bear in mind this “Government knows best” argument has been made many times before. The first amendment to the Constitution of India was brought within 16 months of its adoption, by the provisional parliament, even before the first government was elected. The provisional parliament was led by the interim prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The amendment allowed the state to occasionally restrict the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression on grounds that it may cause public disorder. This was the reaction to fears about the stability of the new republic in its founding moments in the face of increasing ‘crowd action’ relating to the partition of India, peasant movements in Telangana, food shortages, etc.

² <https://thewire.in/law/indianisation-justice-system-nv-ramana-democracy-nation-state>

By bringing in the first amendment which also brought in other changes relating to property rights etc., the provisional parliament sought to ensure for the state the power to restrict speeches and crowds that might lead to any kind of public disorder.

This amendment was opposed within the provisional parliament by those who felt that the new Indian republican must trust its dissenting crowds.

Siddharth Narrain describes the debate as a question about where to place ‘Indian’ legitimacy: in the provisional parliament and the fledgling post-colonial state; or amidst the unorganized crowds. When the first amendment was approved, it would seem that ‘Indianisation’ tilted a bit towards the state.

India’s early elected popular governments continued to repurpose colonial laws and apply them to the free country. Equally, the republic’s citizens continued to legally ‘push back’ in recognition of their own constitutional status.³

The CJI’s use of ‘Indianisation’ is a reference to the need for the ‘democratization’ of justice delivery, as opposed to iterating a scheme, which has the state at its centre. He speaks of the ‘barriers [of style and language] for common people in approaching the justice delivery system’.

In CJI Ramana’s words;

“When I say Indianisation, I mean the need to adapt to the practical realities of our society and localise our justice delivery systems. For example, parties from a rural place fighting a family dispute are usually made to feel out of place in the court. They do not understand the arguments or pleadings which are mostly in English, a language alien to them. These days, judgments have become lengthy, which further complicates the position of litigants. For the parties to understand the implications of a judgment, they are forced to spend more money”.

The CJI underlined that courts should be litigant centric, as they are the ultimate beneficiaries. He specified that the Indianisation of the Judiciary means the localization of the justice delivery system.

³ A People’s Constitution by Rohit De

It must be said, however, that beyond the alienation caused by language and protocol, justice delivery unfolds within the prevalent social and political logic of the times. For the justice system to be democratised, the prevailing social and political logic must be democratic and not majoritarian. But this is not always the case.

Impact of the Colonial laws on the Indian Legal System

During the colonial era, multiple acts were introduced by the British to make the administration of such a large, diverse nation convenient for themselves and subsequently, a number of these legislations influenced several provisions formulated by the Drafting Committee, which became an integral part of not only the Constitution of India but the governance system in the country. 'British Acts' have even caused some constitutional and political scholars to believe that the formation of the Constitution was a transfer of power from one set of leaders to another and the underlying policies remained similar to what existed before the country attained independence.

As we know, Supreme Court in India was established by the Regulating Act of 1773 which was the first Act brought by the British to regulate the affairs of the East India Company (EIC) and exercise control over members of EIC who were engaged in cases of corruption and bribery frequently, by unequivocally prohibiting members to engage in any private trade. Additionally, the idea of giving different types of veto powers to the President of India was inspired by the Pitts India Act of 1784 which was brought to distinguish between the commercial and political functions of the Company and gave extensive veto powers to the Governor-general to maintain strict control over EIC.

Power of Veto was further extended via the Charter Act of 1793 and empowered the Governor-general to override his Council's decision under certain circumstances. These veto powers are still accorded to the President of India via absolute veto, suspensive veto, and pocket veto. Even the provision regarding the President being made the Commander in Chief of Indian armed forces was inspired from the Pitt's India Act of 1786 under which Lord Cornwallis, the then Governor-General of India, was to be the Commander in Chief of Indian forces.

For the sake of timelines, the administrative period in pre-independent India is divided into two phases; Company rule and Crown rule. Company rule started in 1773 when East India Company

took up political functions in addition to a commercial role, the British government stayed on the sidelines while simultaneously giving directives to EIC officials to hone them in their administrative responsibilities. However, after the first war of independence in 1857, the need was felt for more strategic control and accountability to the Crown and India came under the direct rule of the British Crown via the Act for the Good Governance of India, 1858. So, the Acts that came post-1857 have played a decisive role in laying the foundation for the administrative and governance system in the country.

The portfolio system started by Lord Canning under Indian Councils Act, 1861 was the beginning of the Cabinet system in India. This Act of 1861 was also noteworthy because it empowered the Viceroy (post the 1857 war, through the Act for Good Government of India, 1858, another post of Viceroy was created – Governor-General and Viceroy were the same individuals acting in different capacities) to issue ordinances without any concurrence of the legislative council in cases of emergency and these ordinances were to have a life of six months. This provision later found a place in Article 123 of the Constitution of India albeit with certain exceptions.

The beginning of the Parliamentary system in India can also be attributed to a pre-independence Act called the Indian Councils Act of 1892 but the three most important acts that contributed immensely to our Constitution are the Indian Councils Act 1909, Government of India Act 1919 and the Government of India Act, 1935.

Indian Councils Act, 1909 or Morley-Minto Reforms was a legislation brought by the British to accept some demands of moderates without having to deal with the extremists (Moderates and extremists were two groups within the Indian National Congress of which the former believed in getting dominion status for India through constitutional means while the latter believed in attaining Poorna Swaraj or complete independence by rightful means). This was a British tactic to pacify and appease Moderates in line with their divide and rule policy. The act not only introduced an element of election to legislative councils, but it also provided for the first time, for an association of Indians with the executive councils of Viceroys and Governors. Consequently, Satyendra Prasad Sinha became the 1st Indian to join the Viceroy's executive council. It can thus be concluded that this act was the beginning of the representative system in India.

Another key legislation was the Government of India Act of 1919 or Montague-Chelmsford reforms, which initiated the process of demarcating and separating central and provincial subjects, a concept which is a vital part of the Indian Constitution in the form of the 7th schedule which classifies subjects into three lists (Union List, State List, and Concurrent List). It also introduced the bicameral system (having two houses – upper and lower) and gave women a certain income threshold and voting rights, although they still weren't allowed to contest elections. Most importantly, this Act established the office of Speaker and Deputy Speaker (Frederick Whyte was the first Speaker and Sachidananda Sinha was the first Deputy Speaker appointed in 1921) in addition to establishing a Public Service Commission. Additionally, the rule pertaining to allocating the first hour of every parliamentary meeting to asking questions was also introduced under this Act, a practice that is still crucial to the effective functioning of both the lower and upper houses in the Parliament.

The most important piece of legislation which could even be called a blueprint of the Constitution of India is the Government of India Act, 1935. Having 321 sections and 10 schedules, it had several significant articles – it gave certain residuary powers to Viceroy, provided for a federal court set up in 1937, abolished diarchy (a system of double government officially introduced by the Act of 1919) and provided autonomy to provinces, making the Governor the head of the executive organ in the state. It required Governor to make decisions following the advice of ministers responsible to provincial legislatures. It provided for the establishment of the Reserve Bank of India and contained provisions for the establishment of the Provincial Public Service Commission and Joint Public Service Commission.

Thus, it can be said that members of the drafting committee chaired by Dr. Ambedkar were working with a broad legislative framework comprising existing institutional procedures and laws and the Constitution that we currently have is a result of pre-independence legislations combined with extensive research based on several different Constitutions from diverse parts of the world. Even though the combined, continuous efforts of the three organs of the government over the past 71 years have helped us in creating a robust system of governance which is distinctive to India, there are still many miles to go in making India, a true, independent and accountable democracy.

Judges' opinion on 'Indianisation of legal system'

- Former CJI P.N. Bhagwati's statement - In the M.C. Mehta vs Union of India⁴, 1986 ; Justice P.N. Bhagwati has said in "*We cannot allow our judicial thinking to be constricted by reference to the law as it prevails in England or for the matter of that in any other foreign country. We no longer need the crutches of a foreign legal order. We are certainly prepared to receive light from whatever source it comes from, but we have to build up our own jurisprudence.*"
- Chief Justice of India's statement- According to him, 'Indianisation' means the need to adapt to the practical realities of our society and localise our justice delivery systems. The CJI has cited that the current proceedings are lengthy, expensive and in English and are technical to manage. Rules and procedures of justice delivery should be made simple for the inclusion of the common man in the judiciary.
- Justice (retired) S.A. Bobde's statement- In Justice K.S.Puttaswamy(Retd) vs Union Of India, 2018⁵, he observed that "*even in the ancient and religious texts of India, a well-developed sense of privacy is evident.... Arthashastra prohibits entry into another's house, without the owner's consent*".
- Justice S. Abdul Nazeer's statement- While speaking on the 'Decolonisation of the Indian Legal System', he underscores the need to chuck the colonial legal system detrimental to national interest and embrace it. He had concluded that "*there can be no doubt that this colonial legal system is not suitable for the Indian population. The need of the hour is the Indianisation of the legal system... to decolonise the Indian legal system*"⁶.
"Great lawyers and judges are not born but are made by proper education and great legal traditions as were Manu, Kautilya, Katyayana, Brihaspati, Narada, Parashara, Yajnavalkya and other legal giants of ancient India...continued neglect of their great

⁴ <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1486949/>

⁵ <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/127517806/>

⁶ <https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/justice-abdul-nazeer-ancient-indian-jurisprudence-manu-kautilya-colonial-legal-system-188437>

knowledge and adherence to the alien colonial legal system is detrimental to the goals of our Constitution and against our national interests.”

Past Recommendations by various Reports and Commissions

S. R. Das Committee, 1951: In May 1950, the Madras Provincial Lawyers Conference held under the presidency of Shri S. Varadachariar resolved that the Government of India should appoint a committee to evolve a scheme for an all-India Bar and amend the Indian Bar Councils Act to bring it in conformity with the new Constitution. The Committee was constituted and asked to examine and report on:

- The desirability and feasibility of a completely unified Bar for the whole of India,
- The continuance or abolition of the dual system of counsel and solicitor (or agent) which obtains in the Supreme court and the Bombay and Calcutta High Courts.
- The continuance or abolition of different classes of legal practitioners, such as advocates of the Supreme Court, advocates of the various High Courts, district court pleaders, mukhtars (entitled to practice in criminal courts only), revenue agents, and income-tax practitioners,
- The desirability and feasibility of establishing a single Bar Council for the whole of India and for each State,
- The establishment of a separate Bar Council for the Supreme Court,
- The consolidation and revision of the various enactments (Central as well as State) relating to legal practitioners, and all other connected matters.⁷

The Committee found that it is desirable and expedient as well as possible to create a unified National Bar. It was suggested that the uniform minimum qualification for admission to the roll of Advocates should be a law degree obtained after at least a two years' study of Law in the University after having first graduated in Arts, Science or Commerce and a further apprentice course of study for one year in practical subjects. It also stated that the establishment of an All-India Bar Council is desirable, important, necessary and quite feasible. A State Bar

⁷ <http://www.barcouncilofindia.org/about/about-the-bar-council-of-india/history/>

Council for each of the states was also envisaged. The question of creating a separate Bar Council for the Supreme Court did not find favour from the Committee.

Law Commission, 1958: The All India Judicial Services (AIJS) was first proposed by the 14th report of the Law Commission in 1958. The Commission recommended the establishment, at the Centre and in the States, of an appellate Tribunal or Tribunals presided over by a legally qualified Chairman along with experienced civil servants as members to which memorials and appeals from Government servants could be referred in respect of disciplinary action taken against them. The establishment of such a Tribunal was expected to serve a double purpose of speedy and cost-effective justice. Besides this, the existence of a speaking order passed by a Tribunal was to assist the Courts to reject frivolous petitions summarily.

Malimath Committee, 2000: The Justice Malimath Committee was constituted to suggest reforms in the Criminal Justice System of India. It submitted a report with 158 recommendations to the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, who was also the Home Minister. The Committee felt that the existing system “weighed in favour of the accused and did not adequately focus on justice to the victims of crime.”

Some of the important recommendations by the committee were -

- The Committee examined, in particular, the Inquisitorial System followed in France, Germany and other Continental countries and recommended that the Court must search for truth, assign a pro-active role to the Judges, to give directions to the investigating officers and prosecution agencies in the matter of investigation and leading evidence with the object of seeking the truth and focusing on justice to victims.
- The Committee recommended that without subjecting the accused to any duress, the court should have the freedom to question the accused to elicit the relevant information and if he refuses to answer, to draw an adverse inference against the accused.
- Keeping in view the Right of the Accused, the Committee, therefore, recommended that all the rights of the accused flowing from the laws and judicial decisions should be collected and put in a Schedule to the Code and they should be translated by each State in the respective regional language and published in a form of a pamphlet for free distribution to the accused and to the general public.

- Law should be amended to the effect that the literate witness signs the statement and illiterate one puts his thumb impression thereon. A copy of the statement should mandatorily be given to the witness.
- Qualifications prescribed for the appointment of Judges at different levels should be reviewed to ensure that highly competent Judges are inducted at different levels. Special attention should be paid to enquire into the background and antecedents of the persons appointed to Judicial Offices to ensure that persons of proven integrity and character are appointed.
- Intensive training should be imparted in theoretical, practical and in court management to all the Judges.⁸

Improvements are done in the Legal System

- Virtual court system: The regular court proceedings in our Indian courts in such unprecedented times are either being adjourned or have been carried out virtually via videoconferencing. There were 96,239 virtual hearings in the Supreme court and 40,43,300 virtual hearings in High Courts till September 2021. To try traffic offences virtual courts have been set up in 12 cities. This step by the judiciary helped a lot, in which it handled 75 lakh cases and realized 160.05 crores in fines.
- E-Courts portal: It is a one-stop solution for all stakeholders like the litigants, advocates, government agencies, police, and common citizens. This portal is designed in a way that uses multiple languages and an individual can easily avail of such services with ease. One of the main objectives of this portal is to provide efficient and time-bound citizen-centric service. It is a consolidation of all the portals across the country. Case status, next hearing date, cause lists, orders, and judgments can be delivered quickly.
- E-filing: E-filing, also known as electronic filing, is a facility that provides filing of cases through the internet. It has proven to be effective in saving time, money, and travel for councils and clients. Physical presence in the court is not mandatory. The case files get

⁸ www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/criminal_justice_system.pdf

digitized automatically. It has impacted the environment positively by reducing the paper footprint.

- *E-Payment of court fees and fines:* Online payment can be made by the citizens using the portal. This will reduce the usage of stamps, cheques and cash. The e-Payment portal is integrated with state-specific vendors like SBI ePay, GRAS, e-GRAS, JeGRAS, Himkosh, etc.
- *National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG):* The statistics of cases pending at the national, state, district and individual court levels are now made accessible to the general public, researchers, academicians and the society at large. Any individual can access this information by visiting the National Judicial Data Grid portal.
- *National Service and Tracking of Electronic Process (NSTEP):* This is a mechanism that consists of a centralized process service tracking application and a mobile app for the bailiffs. This is used for quick delivery of summons, notices, processes and the reduction of unreasonable delays in process serving.
- *AI-based SUPACE Portal:* In May 2020, the Supreme Court launched an Artificial Intelligence (AI) based portal ‘SUPACE’ in the judicial system aimed at assisting judges with legal research. CJI Ramana inaugurated a system whereby the criminal appeals in Bombay and Delhi HC will be solved with the help of SUPACE.
- *e-Sewa Kendra:* The e-Sewa Kendra is set up as a one-stop centre for accessing all the facilities provided under the e-Courts Project. It has been set up in high courts and one in the district court of each state on a trial basis. With these centres, a litigant can acquire information on case status and get judgments and orders passed by the courts.
- *Interoperable Criminal Justice System (ICJS):* The Interoperable Criminal Justice System (ICJS) is an initiative of the e-Committee to transfer data and information between the

different pillars of the criminal justice system, like courts, police, jails, juvenile homes and forensic science laboratories seamlessly, from one platform.

- Judicial infrastructure: Court halls have been increased from 15,818 in 2014 to 20,218 in 2021. Residential units were increased from 10,211 in 2014 to 17,815 in 2021. Infra development scheme for the judiciary has been extended till 2025-26. Lawyers' halls, toilets, and computer rooms in the courts have also been increased.
- Judicial appointments: 35 judges have been appointed to Supreme Court whereas 602 judges have been appointed to High Courts.

Need for 'Indianisation' of Judiciary'

- Lengthy Judgements in Foreign Language: Parties from a rural place fighting a dispute are usually made to feel out of place in court. Judgements and Pleadings in English (a language alien to them) make it difficult for them to understand what is written in the petitions and don't have the awareness of their fundamental rights. The lengthy judgements further complicate the position of litigants and the parties to understand the implication of judgement and to understand the implications of a judgment, they are forced to spend more money. Even after spending money justice is not guaranteed.
- British Origin of Indian Judiciary: The genesis of India's current judicial system can be traced back to the Colonial system of the judiciary which was established more or less from the master-servant point of view and not from the public's point of view and this working and the style of courts do not sit well with the complexities of India. The systems, practices and rules being colonial in origin, are not exactly best suited to the needs of the Indian population.
- Unavailability of Judges: Currently India has only 78 judges per million people whereas in European countries there are 7200 judges per million people and subsequently, it raises case pendency. William Edward Gladstone (the former PM of England) cited the phrase *Justice delayed is Justice Denied*, this phrase means if justice is not carried out at right time

then even if it is carried out later it is not real justice, because when there was a demand of justice there was lack of justice.

- *Extremely Less Representation of Women in Higher Judiciary*: The first-ever woman judge (Justice Fatheema Beevi) in the Supreme Court (SC) was appointed in 1989, 39 years after the apex court came into existence. Since then, only 10 women have become judges in the apex court. In High Courts, women judges account for only 11%. In five HCs (Patna, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Uttarakhand high courts), no woman served as a judge.
- *Pendency and disposal*: The Indian judicial system has over 3.53 crore pending cases. In four high courts where sufficient data was available, 87% of cases were disposed of in 10-15 years, and only 5% in less than 5 years. More than 64 per cent of all cases are pending for more than a year. Recently one judge made a statement that even if no new cases are filed, clearing the existing vacancies and backlogs, will take the judiciary 100 years. The lack of timely judgement has led to the erosion of trust in the judiciary.
- *Low strength of Police Force*: The strength of the police force in the country is well below international norms. As of 1st March 2016, the total sanctioned police force was approximately 181 policemen per lakh population. The UN recommended the number of police personnel per lakh population be 222. The low strength of the police force will certainly hamper the law and order in a state and sufferers will only be the public.

Way forward

- *Role of Panchayats*: The Panchayati Raj Institutions have to be empowered and all the small cases should not be allowed to clog the normal court system but shall be given to them. This institution teaches people the first lesson of democracy and strengthens the idea of democracy at a grassroots level. It brings political awareness to rural India. People can solve their problems through mutual cooperation because they have complete faith in it.
- *Deadline of judgements*: The judges shall lay down the timelines within which the argument should be finished or there could be written submissions instead of extending the

oral argument, which will be less time consuming and it will help save the precious time for the judiciary.

- Role of Advocates: Advocates must ensure that unnecessary adjournments are not sought because they are also supposed to play an important role in the justice delivery system as they are the officers of the court. They also must ensure that unnecessarily adjournments are not sought so that the cases can be decided as expeditiously as possible without going into the litigation of procedural aspects but without compromising the justice delivery system and the basic principles of natural justice.
- Indianisation at the Grass-Root Level: The use of Indian/regional languages in courts at the grassroots level becomes more significant in a sound judicial system for a country like India. It is permitted but it is not used by most judges. The complexities in the proceedings and judgements must be removed and made as simple as possible. Local conditions also have to be taken into account, for instance, what particular kinds of cases are coming from a certain region. All these measures will give the local conditions due importance.
- Mediation as a Saviour: Mediation is a cost-effective and efficient method. It was practised since the Vedic times when Lord Krishna was the first mediator, who did mediation between the Kauravas and Pandavas. Mediation is a win-win situation as the process not only reduces the pendency of cases but also works up to the satisfaction level of both the parties as in mediation, they are the ones making a decision.
- Changing Patriarchal Mindset: The need of the hour is to correct the patriarchal mindset in recommending and approving the names of those who are to be elevated as high court judges and come out with more representation to worthy women lawyers and district judges for elevation. No reforms in the judiciary can effectively take place unless it is inclusive of women. Although the judiciary appointed few women judges but it still needs to be increased.

- Legal outreach programs: There is a need to strengthen the legal outreach programs. Universities can play an important role in this by setting up a legal awareness camp in rural and slum areas. These camps will help people to know their rights and duties. It will also help law students to know more about social problems.
- Statutory and administrative law reform: Modernizing and weeding out old and dysfunctional elements in legislation. It was also raised by our Prime Minister. Reducing government intervention in areas where it is not required. Statutory reforms in the criminal justice and procedural laws as well as reforms in land/property related laws need immediate attention because they are outdated and it will not be viable for courts to continue with these laws.
- Police reforms: The important areas where reforms are needed will be state-level Legislative and Executive, to allow police forces to serve more effectively the purpose of the police force of a modern democratic state. States should be encouraged, with fiscal incentives, to introduce critical legislative reform to their police acts, most of which are still based on the police act of 1861. A Task Force must be created under the MHA to identify non-core functions that can be outsourced to save on manpower. The states should be encouraged to ensure that the representation of women in the police force is increased. India should launch a common nationwide contact for attending to the urgent security needs of the citizens.

Conclusion

The project of Indianisation is not so much about changing the present system into one drawn from what the historians and anthropologists may recognize as Indian tradition or culture, but simply about making a broader base of Indians a part of the system. The fundamental requirement of a good judicial administration is accessibility, affordability and speedy justice, which will not be realized until and unless the justice delivery system is made within the reach of the individual in a time-bound manner and within a reasonable cost. Therefore, continuous formative assessment is the key to strengthening and reinforcing the justice delivery system in India.

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