

5. Judicial Delays and Criminal Justice Reforms in India – Polity

The Allahabad High Court, while hearing a bail application, highlighted growing delays and pendency in India's criminal justice system, issuing directives to streamline justice delivery.

1. Background

India's criminal justice system, inherited from colonial administrative structures and amended through post-independence legislation, faces systemic challenges threatening constitutional guarantees of speedy justice and fair trial. The judiciary, comprising the Supreme Court, 25 High Courts, and thousands of districts and subordinate courts, handles over 4.5 crore pending cases with chronic delays spanning years and sometimes decades. March 2026 closed with 93,143 cases pending in the Supreme Court—an increase of 1,141 cases compared to February 2026 when the Court saw its first pendency drop in a year, highlighting that even apex judicial institutions struggle with mounting backlogs. The Allahabad High Court judgment, while deciding a bail application, went beyond the immediate case to address systemic failures recognizing that speedy trial is integral to the Right to Life and Personal Liberty under Article 21, and delayed justice undermines public trust in the judiciary threatening democratic legitimacy.

The Court issued comprehensive directives to the Uttar Pradesh government, police authorities, and judicial officers addressing multiple dimensions—strengthening court infrastructure through additional staff and facilities, making Forensic Science Laboratories autonomous departments improving efficiency, filling FSL vacancies and providing high-end instruments within one year, training police officers in forensic evidence collection, providing personal security for district judges similar to Punjab and Haryana, mandating monthly monitoring meetings between police chiefs and district judges, implementing mandatory DNA matching queries in investigations, using AI speech-to-text modules for recording witness statements, establishing accountability for negligence in court process execution, and promoting e-courts and digital processes including e-summons, e-warrants, e-FIR, and e-chargesheet as per Bhartiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita 2023 and subsequent rules. These directives reflect growing judicial activism addressing institutional failures where executive and legislative inaction has allowed justice delivery systems to deteriorate, creating constitutional crises where undertrial prisoners spend years in custody without trial, victims await justice for decades, and public confidence in rule of law erodes.

2. Understanding Judicial Reforms

Definition and Necessity

1. Judicial reforms refer to measures aimed at improving efficiency, transparency, accessibility, and accountability of the judicial system.
2. In India, reforms are necessary due to rising case pendency exceeding 4.5 crore cases, shortage of judges with approximately 30–40% vacancies, high litigation costs making justice inaccessible to poor, and delays in justice delivery spanning years.

3. Allahabad High Court Directives

Infrastructure and Staffing

1. Strengthening Court Infrastructure – State government to provide additional staff and infrastructure to district courts considering heavy workload.
2. Filling Vacancies in FSLs – Make every effort to fill vacancies in Forensic Science Laboratories along with providing high-end instruments within one year.

Forensic Science Enhancement

1. Autonomy to FSLs – Consider making Uttar Pradesh Forensic Science Laboratory an autonomous department under Home Ministry as requested by MHA.
2. Training in Forensic Evidence – Ensure training to police officers for proper collection of forensic evidence.

3. Mandatory DNA Matching – Issue directions to investigating officers to query FSLs regarding DNA matching of blood from weapons/cloth with accused and deceased.

Security and Coordination

1. Security for Judicial Officers – Consider providing personal security officers to all district court judges similar to Punjab and Haryana.
2. Monthly Monitoring Meetings – DGP to ensure district police chiefs attend monthly monitoring cell meetings under district judge chairmanship personally.

Technology Integration

1. Use of AI in Recording Statements – Implement speech-to-text AI modules to record witness statements reducing documentation delays.
2. Promotion of E-Courts – Use e-summons, e-warrants, e-FIR, e-chargesheet as per BNSS 2023 and subsequent rules.

Accountability Mechanisms

1. Accountability for Negligence – Issue circulars mentioning that negligence in executing court processes may attract disciplinary proceedings against police officers.

4. Major Reasons Behind Delays

Shortage of Staff

1. District courts face shortages of clerical and support staff including stenographers and process servers, increasing burdens on judicial officers and delaying case disposal.

Poor Police Cooperation

1. Police often fail ensuring timely appearance of accused persons and witnesses leading to repeated adjournments.
2. Delays in executing summons and warrants postpone trial proceedings indefinitely.

Weak Forensic Infrastructure

1. FSLs suffer from expert shortages and outdated equipment delaying forensic reports.
2. Pending DNA profiling reports slow murder and assault investigations.

Lack of Coordination

1. Poor coordination among police, prosecution, and judiciary weakens effective case management and timely trials.
2. Delays in sharing investigation records affect prosecution and court proceedings.

Frequent Adjournments

1. Repeated adjournments by parties prolong trials and increase pendency.
2. Lawyers seeking dates without substantial progress delays justice.

Inadequate Infrastructure

1. Many courts lack sufficient courtrooms, digital facilities, and basic infrastructure for efficient functioning.
2. Multiple courts functioning in limited space reduce hearing efficiency.

Judicial Vacancies

1. Large vacancies among judges reduce court capacity to handle growing caseloads.
2. Delay in judicial appointments overburdening existing judges.

Slow Investigations

1. Inefficient police investigations prolong charge sheet filing and trial initiation.
2. Cases remain pending due to incomplete evidence collection.

5. Importance of Timely Justice

Protection of Fundamental Rights

1. Timely justice safeguards Article 21 rights because prolonged trials violate life, dignity, and personal liberty of victims and accused.

2. Undertrial prisoners often spend years in jail before conviction or acquittal.

Strengthening Public Trust

1. Speedy case disposal enhances public confidence in judiciary and reinforces faith in democratic institutions and rule of law.
2. Delayed justice in high-profile cases creates public dissatisfaction and mistrust.

Effective Deterrence

1. Quick investigation and timely punishment deter crime by creating fear of legal consequences.
2. Fast-track courts in sexual assault cases improve accountability and deterrence.

Victims' Rights Protection

1. Timely justice ensures victims receive relief, compensation, and closure without prolonged suffering.
2. Delays in domestic violence or sexual offence cases intensify trauma for survivors.

Economic and Social Stability

1. Delays negatively affect business confidence, investments, and social harmony by creating uncertainty.
2. Prolonged commercial disputes discourage domestic and foreign investment.

6.Role of Artificial Intelligence

Case Management

1. AI helps courts sort, categorize, and prioritize cases reducing pendency and improving efficiency.
2. AI software can automatically identify urgent bail or constitutional matters for quicker listing.

Speech-to-Text Recording

1. AI-enabled technology instantly converts oral statements into written records reducing documentation delays.
2. Police and courts use AI tools to record witness statements accurately during trials.

Legal Research

1. AI tools assist judges and lawyers in quickly identifying relevant case laws, precedents, and provisions.
2. AI-based legal databases help faster preparation of judgments and arguments.

Predictive Analytics

1. AI analyses patterns in pending cases and predicts delays helping improve case-flow management.
2. AI dashboards identify courts with excessive pendency for administrative intervention.

Translation and Accessibility

1. AI-based translation systems make proceedings accessible in multiple regional languages.
2. Real-time translation tools help litigants understand proceedings in native languages.

7.Efforts to Reduce Pendency

E-Courts Mission Mode Project

1. Launched in 2007 under National e-Governance Plan, aims to digitally transform district and subordinate courts.
2. Promotes computerization, online access to judicial services, and improved efficiency.

Virtual Courts

1. Use videoconferencing for remote hearings reducing delays from physical appearances and logistical constraints.
2. Improves accessibility, saves time, and accelerates case disposal.

E-Filing System

1. Enables electronic submission of cases and documents through online platforms.
2. Minimizes paperwork, reduces administrative delays, and speeds up judicial processing.

Interoperable Criminal Justice System

1. Facilitates seamless data sharing among police, courts, prisons, prosecution, and forensic laboratories.

2. Improved coordination helps faster investigation, trial, and disposal.

Fast Track Courts

1. Established for speedy disposal of specific categories especially long-pending and sensitive matters.
2. Helps reduce backlog and ensures quicker justice delivery.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

1. Lok Adalat's, Gram Nyayalayas, mediation, and ODR provide faster, cost-effective alternatives to litigation.
2. Reduces burden on regular courts and promotes amicable settlement.

8.Way Forward

Judicial Appointments

1. Expedite filling of judicial vacancies through streamlined appointment processes, adequate budgetary allocations, and coordinated efforts between judiciary and executive, while ensuring merit-based selections maintaining judicial independence and quality ensuring courts have adequate judge strength proportional to caseloads.

Infrastructure Modernization

1. Strengthen court infrastructure through adequate courtrooms, digital facilities, support staff, and modern equipment enabling efficient functioning, while ensuring forensic laboratories receive adequate funding, trained personnel, and advanced instruments improving investigation quality and reducing delays in forensic reports.

Technology Integration

1. Scale up e-Courts initiatives, virtual hearings, e-filing systems, and AI-based case management across all courts ensuring digital transformation reaches district and subordinate levels, while providing training to judges, lawyers, and court staff in using digital technologies effectively.

Institutional Coordination

1. Strengthen coordination among police, prosecution, judiciary, and forensic laboratories through ICJS platform, regular monitoring meetings, and shared databases ensuring seamless information flow reducing delays from poor institutional coordination and improving case management efficiency.

Accountability Mechanisms

1. Establish accountability for delays through performance monitoring, disciplinary proceedings for negligence, and transparent tracking systems identifying bottlenecks, while incentivizing efficient performance through career progression, recognition, and institutional support rewarding timely justice delivery.

Conclusion

The Allahabad High Court's directives address systemic delays in criminal justice with March 2026 seeing 93,143 Supreme Court pending cases. Directives include strengthening infrastructure, making FSLs autonomous, filling vacancies within one year, training police in forensics, providing judge security, monthly monitoring meetings, mandatory DNA queries, AI speech-to-text for statements, accountability for negligence, and e-court promotion using BNSS 2023 provisions. Delays stem from staff shortages, poor police cooperation, weak forensic infrastructure, coordination gaps, frequent adjournments, inadequate infrastructure, judicial vacancies, and slow investigations. Timely justice protects Article 21 rights, strengthens public trust, deters crime, protects victims, and ensures stability. AI enables case management, speech-to-text recording, legal research, predictive analytics, and translation. Efforts include e-Courts Project, virtual courts, e-filing, ICJS, fast-track courts,

Source - <https://lawbeat.in/bar-speaks/from-33-to-37-judges-modi-govts-quiet-judicial-reform-puts-spotlight-back-on-supreme-court-1589026>