

JUDICIAL FUNCTIONS OF PANCHAYATS IN ANCIENT AND MODERN INDIAN LEGAL SYSTEM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE GRAM NYAYALAYAS ACT, 2008

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ABSTRACT

The institution of the Panchayat has been an integral component of the Indian legal tradition, serving as an indigenous mechanism for decentralized justice from the Vedic period to the present constitutional era. This paper examines the judicial functions of Panchayats in the ancient and modern Indian legal systems through a comparative analysis, with special reference to the **Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008**. It undertakes a jurisprudential assessment of the evolution of Panchayat justice, highlighting the significant changes and advancements in its institutional structure and judicial functions. In the absence of centralized courts, the **Sabha** and **Samiti** functioned as proto-Panchayat institutions, administering justice through collective deliberation based on the principles of **Dharma**, **Rta** and **Ācāra (custom)**. These normative foundations promoted ethical jurisprudence, legal pluralism, restorative justice, reconciliation, and social harmony. Over time, Panchayat justice attained institutional maturity, as confirmed by textual and epigraphical evidence, while **Ācāra** emerged as a binding source of law and Panchayats developed into organized judicial bodies enforcing their decisions through social sanctions. This historical evolution demonstrates that Panchayat justice progressed from moral assemblies to institutionally recognized courts, establishing decentralized justice as an enduring feature of Indian legal civilization. The paper further analyses the **Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008**, enacted to strengthen access to justice at the grassroots level. Although the Act seeks to revive decentralized justice, it departs from the traditional Panchayat model by vesting judicial authority exclusively in a State-appointed **Nyayadhikari** rather than elected Panchayat members. Consequently, Gram Nyayalayas function as statutory subordinate courts within the existing judicial hierarchy instead of community-based judicial institutions. The study concludes that while the Act advances constitutional objectives of accessible justice, it does not fully preserve the indigenous jurisprudential character and participatory nature of ancient Panchayat justice.

Keywords: Panchayat Justice; Ancient Indian Legal System; Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008; Decentralized Justice.

INTRODUCTION

In India panchayat is very old concept and evidence is traced in many ways, and it plays a very prominent role in the administration of justice. Its growth has been gradual and organic, rooted in the socio-cultural life of villages where local disputes were traditionally resolved through community participation and consensus. From the Vedic period itself, institutions resembling panchayats existed, as reflected in the Rig Veda's reference to sabha and samiti where matters of social order and justice were deliberated collectively. The Atharva Veda also emphasizes harmony and collective decision-making, stating "Sam gacchadhvam sam vadadhvam" walk together speak together highlighting the spirit of participatory justice.

However, the relevance of panchayats in the administration of justice faced significant bottlenecks during the colonial period, when centralized and formal judicial institutions

weakened indigenous dispute-resolution mechanisms. After independence the Constitution of India sought to revive and strengthen panchayati institutions by recognizing them as instruments of democratic decentralization and grassroots governance. This constitutional vision was further reinforced through legislative measures.¹

In recent times, the enactment of the Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008 has given renewed strength to the role of panchayats in the administration of justice by establishing village-level courts aimed at providing speedy, accessible and inexpensive justice to rural populations.² Thus, the Act represents a modern reaffirmation of India's ancient tradition of local justice blending constitutional ideals with time-tested indigenous practices.

1.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a doctrinal and comparative legal research methodology to examine the judicial functions of Panchayats in the ancient and modern Indian legal systems, with special reference to the Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including ancient legal texts such as the Vedas, Dharmashastras, Manusmriti, Yājñavalkya Smṛiti, Nārada Smṛiti, and Kautilya's Arthashastra, along with epigraphical evidence relating to village self-governance. The study also analyses constitutional provisions, the Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008, judicial decisions, Law Commission Reports, parliamentary debates, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other authoritative legal literature.

A comparative approach has been employed to evaluate the continuity and transformation of Panchayat justice from the ancient decentralized adjudicatory system to the contemporary statutory framework of Gram Nyayalayas. The research critically examines the jurisprudential foundations of Panchayat justice, including Dharma, Rta and Ācāra (custom), and compares them with the institutional structure, jurisdiction, and procedural framework established under the Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008. The study further adopts an analytical and historical method to assess the evolution of Panchayat justice, the changes introduced in judicial practices and procedures, and the extent to which the modern statutory framework preserves or departs from the indigenous model of community-based dispute resolution. The findings are interpreted through the principles of legal pluralism, decentralized justice, and constitutional governance to evaluate the effectiveness of the present legal framework in achieving accessible and participatory justice at the grassroots level.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the jurisprudential evolution and judicial functions of Panchayats in the ancient Indian legal system, with particular emphasis on the principles of Dharma, Rta and Ācāra and to analyse their role in the development of decentralized justice and legal pluralism.
2. To critically evaluate the Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008, by comparing its institutional structure, jurisdiction, and judicial framework with the traditional Panchayat system, in order to assess the extent to which it reflects or departs from the indigenous model of grassroots justice in India.

¹ Prabhat Datta, 'Democratic Decentralization through Panchayati Raj in Contemporary India: The Changes and Challenges' *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, No. 49 (2009).

² Kamal Jeet Singh, Vikram Singh and Vijay Chaudhary, "The Gram Nyayalaya Act, 2008: Key to Reviving Grassroot Justice for Common People" *Indian Journal of Law and Justice* (2012).

1.3 PANCHAYAT JUSTICE IN ANCIENT INDIAN LEGAL SYSTEM

The Rigvedic

During the Rigvedic period, decentralized justice emerged through the Sabha and Samiti, which functioned as proto-Panchayat institutions. In the absence of centralized courts, Dharma, Rta, and custom (Ācāra) constituted the foundational legal norms governing dispute resolution.

Later Vedic Period

Village assemblies retained an active role in resolving routine disputes especially those relating to land ownership, marital relations, succession and inheritance as well as obligations arising from ritual and customary practices. Its legitimacy derived from social approval and collective acceptance rather than from codified legal rules. Its emphasis on decentralised community-based adjudication provides a philosophical foundation for modern constitutional ideals of local self-government.³

Panchayat-based justice is best understood as emerging from ethical consensus within the community rather than from the exercise of formal political authority. Its legitimacy flows from shared moral norms and collective acceptance, not from hierarchical power or state-imposed command.

Mahajanpada

The Mahājanapada and Magadhan eras crystallised Indian legal pluralism, integrating Panchayats within layered judicial structures. State formation progressed without displacing local justice, shaping enduring decentralised governance traditions.⁴

Royal courts expanded without eroding Panchayat jurisdiction. Influenced by Buddhist and Jain ethics, Panchayats functioned as first-instance judicial bodies.⁵

Legal pluralism emerges as intrinsic to Indian jurisprudence, not a later import. Royal courts and community bodies functioned concurrently, embodying a deeply rooted multi-forum tradition.

Maurya

The Mauryan Empire demonstrates that centralised governance can harmonise with decentralised justice. By retaining Panchayats as primary forums, it balanced administrative authority with social legitimacy.⁶

Panchayat-based justice is thus presented as a form of integrated decentralisation, functioning within the state framework while retaining its autonomy, rather than as a subordinate extension of state authority.

³ State of U.P. v Pradhan Sangh Kshettra Samiti AIR 1995 SC 1512.

⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Modernity, State, and Toleration in Indian History: Exploring Accommodations and Partitions' in Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor (eds), *Boundaries of Toleration* 233–266 (Columbia University Press, New York, 2014).

⁵ Anne Vallely, 'Jainism, Religious Pluralism, and Identity' in Sonia Sikka and Lori G Beaman (eds), *Multiculturalism and Religious Identity: Canada and India* 222–224 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014).

⁶ Ayushi Pandya, "Grassroot Governance and Its Role in Mediation: The Role and Contribution of Panchayat Raj in Amplification of Alternative Dispute Resolution in India" 4 *Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research* 1(2022).

The Post-Mauryan Period: Saka–Kshatrapas and Kushanas

The post-Mauryan era consolidated decentralised justice as Panchayats evolved into autonomous adjudicatory bodies. Rooted in custom and consensus, this grassroots tradition underpins Part IX's constitutional commitment to local self-governance.⁷

Political fragmentation is reinterpreted as enabling Panchayat resurgence and expanded jurisdiction. Guild courts (śreṇīs) functioned alongside them, evidencing plural, community-based justice structures.

This historical pattern demonstrates that when state authority recedes, justice in India has consistently emerged from social institutions at the grassroots level flowing upward from the community rather than being imposed from above.

The Gupta

The Gupta legal order structured adjudication hierarchically—Kula, village, guild and royal courts—encouraging community-level settlement before escalation, thereby reinforcing autonomy and layered justice.⁸

This structure designates the Panchayat as the court of first instance, mandating exhaustion of local remedies before royal intervention and granting it formal juridical status.⁹

Gupta jurisprudence privileged custom over scriptural rule, provided it upheld morality and public order, with commentators affirming local usage as authoritative legal source.¹⁰ As custodians of local custom, Panchayats exercised genuine normative authority within the legal order. Their determinations carried binding force not solely due to social sanction, but also by virtue of their formal recognition within the Dharmic jurisprudential framework.¹¹

Harṣavardhana

The Gupta–Harṣa era consolidated Panchayat justice, elevating custom to binding law, formally situating village courts within hierarchy, and shaping principled royal pardon within balanced governance.¹²

The analysis affirms Panchayat's formal place within the Dharmasāstric court hierarchy, conceptualises kṣamā as a legal principle and portrays royal pardon as corrective complement to local justice.

Panchayat-based justice thus attains formal legal legitimacy alongside a high degree of ethical and jurisprudential sophistication.

Ancient North India

In this period, Panchayats functioned as both initial and often final courts, as distant royal tribunals addressed mainly revenue or political matters.¹³ Village Panchayats exercised wide

⁷ Namita Sanjay Sugandhi, *Between the Patterns of History: Rethinking Mauryan Imperial Interaction in the Southern Deccan* (PhD diss., The University of Chicago 2008).

⁸ *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* II.19–20.

⁹ Richard W Lariviere (ed and trans), *The Nāradaśmṛti: Critically Edited with an Introduction and Annotated Translation* 37–61 (Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1989).

¹⁰ Medhātithi on *Manusmṛti* II.6.

¹¹ Vijñāneśvara, *Mitākṣarā* on *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* I.7.

¹² Manisha Sethi, *Communities and Courts: Religion and Law in Modern India* 145-150 (Routledge, New Delhi, 2021).

¹³ K M Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India* 233–257 (Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1966).

civil authority over matters of land succession family caste and custom. Their legitimacy emerged from communal consensus and social sanction within the community.¹⁴

Political decentralisation strengthened Panchayats, not weakened them; with fading royal reach, local institutions sustained order exemplifying justice's ascent from community to state within Indian tradition.

It interprets feudal fragmentation as institutional resilience, portraying Panchayats as defined judicial bodies whose authority rested on communal and religious sanctions, not coercive state machinery.

Panchayat-based justice thus emerges as a structurally resilient institution, capable of sustaining effective adjudication even under feudal and politically fragmented conditions.

Ancient South India

Under South Indian dynasties Panchayats represented the highest expression of decentralised justice with legal autonomy procedural sophistication and moral legitimacy. They operated within wider governance structures as developed juridical institutions. Their functioning demonstrated that effective justice could be administered locally without excessive centralization.

The analysis recognises South India as the phase of highest institutional maturity in the development of Panchayat. justice Epigraphical evidence including the Uttaramerur inscriptions reveals specialised judicial committees clear disqualification rules and developed procedural safeguards. Panchayats thus appear as organised quasi judicial bodies with formal structure accountability and adjudicatory competence.

This experience demonstrates that decentralised systems of justice are fully capable of attaining high levels of procedural sophistication.

Sangam Age

The Sangam Age constitutes a foundational stage in the development of South Indian political thought, ethical governance and indigenous legal philosophy. In contrast to the contemporaneous Sanskrit legal tradition articulated through the Dharmasāstras, the Sangam understanding of justice evolved from vernacular moral reasoning, poetic reflection and civic ethics. These ideas are preserved within the Sangam literary corpus most notably in works such as the Tirukkural, Puranānūru, Akanānūru and Silappadikāram which articulate norms of justice grounded in lived social experience rather than formal legal codification.¹⁵

During this period, justice was not expressed through formal statutes or royal proclamations, but was instead rooted in shared social practices and ethical conventions. Its administration was carried out through local assemblies known as manram, which operated as community-based forums for dispute resolution. These institutions reflected early traditions of collective dispute resolution. Their structure and functions foreshadowed the later development of Panchayat institutions within society¹⁶

¹⁴ Andre Beteille, *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* 91–118 (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1974).

¹⁵ K Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India* 45-52 (Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden 1973).

¹⁶ P T Srinivasa Iyengar, *History of the Tamils* 136 (Asian Educational Services, New Delhi 1982).

Manram as a Precursor to Panchayat Justice

The manram functioned as a communal assembly held in open public spaces often beneath trees or within village commons. Elders and respected members collectively deliberated on disputes social misconduct and other matters of community concern. Although these assemblies did not operate under formalised procedural rules they exercised acknowledged authority derived from communal consensus, moral suasion, and adherence to established customary norms.¹⁷

These assemblies exhibit the essential characteristics of Panchayat justice, namely collective deliberation by members of the community reliance on established custom (marabu) a strong emphasis on reconciliation rather than adversarial adjudication and enforcement of decisions through social sanctions. Together, these features reflect a system of justice rooted in communal participation, customary norms and moral authority rather than formal coercive power.¹⁸

The Sangam legal order thus reveals that decentralised justice in India existed prior to the emergence of formal state institutions and developed organically from the lived practices, values and collective life of local communities.

The Sangam manram and the later Panchayat institutions embody the same core jurisprudential principles, namely the decentralisation of authority, active community participation in the administration of justice and the ethical legitimacy of legal decision-making. This continuity demonstrates a long-standing indigenous tradition of community-based justice in which authority was dispersed, participatory and grounded in moral and social acceptance rather than centralized coercion. Thus, Article 40 represents not a modern innovation but a constitutional reaffirmation of ancient Indian practices of collective justice, traceable to Sangam assemblies.

The analysis reconceptualises Sangam justice as collective jurisprudence centred in the manram rather than literary ethics. It highlights arul compassion as a restorative legal principle within community adjudication. The study also traces the spread of Panchayat like justice to regions of Greater India demonstrating its adaptability and influence.

Panchayat justice attains ethical culmination within this tradition. It extends beyond regional boundaries shaping compassionate and community oriented models of adjudication.

1.4 Jurisprudential Assessment, Changes Introduced, and Advancement in Panchayat Justice in the Ancient Indian Legal System

The ancient Indian legal system witnessed the emergence of Panchayat justice within a socio-political framework characterized by the absence of centralized courts. During the early period, the Sabha and Samiti functioned as proto-Panchayat institutions, administering justice through collective deliberation and community participation. The legal order was primarily governed by Dharma, Rta and Ācāra (custom), which constituted the principal sources of law and reflected an ethical jurisprudence founded on morality, collective welfare, and social harmony. Over time, Panchayat justice attained institutional maturity, as evidenced by epigraphical records, and evolved into an effective system of decentralized justice delivery. Significant developments were introduced in judicial practice and procedure, with Ācāra

¹⁷ R Marimuth, "The Panchayat System under the Cholas: Studies from Inscriptions" 21 *Historical Research Letter* 24(2015).

¹⁸ Kesavan Veluthat, *The Political Structure of Early Medieval South India* 144–168 (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1993).

acquiring recognition as a binding source of law in Panchayat adjudication. Dharma remained the paramount jurisprudential foundation, while the principles of pardon, reconciliation, and restorative justice gained prominence. The Panchayat ultimately emerged as a distinct judicial institution, enforcing its decisions through social sanctions and laying the constitutional foundation for modern Panchayati Raj institutions.

This demonstrates that Panchayat justice in India evolved continuously—from moral assemblies to doctrinally recognised courts, institutionally mature bodies, and finally a constitutionally revived system making decentralised justice an indigenous and enduring feature of Indian legal civilisation.

PANCHAYAT JUSTICE IN MODERN INDIAN LEGAL SYSTEM

1.5 The Colonial Impact on Indian Judicial Structures

1.5.1 The British Legal Imagination and Hostility to Indigenous Institutions

Colonial administrators viewed indigenous justice systems, including Panchayats, with scepticism, depicting them as informal, caste-bound and procedurally deficient. Thinkers such as James Mill framed Indian society as legally irrational, an ideological stance used to legitimise the imposition of English law and to marginalise indigenous adjudicatory traditions.¹⁹ This Eurocentric ideology legitimised the replacement of community-based dispute resolution with a centralised state-controlled judiciary.

By depicting indigenous institutions as legally deficient colonial authorities framed imperial courts as neutral reforms, as a result monopolising legal authority and transforming justice from a social practice into an instrument of sovereign domination.

1.5.2 Establishment of Adversarial Colonial Courts

Eurocentric legal ideology did not simply justify the establishment of colonial courts but also redefined justice as a function exclusively exercised by the state. Community based adjudicatory practices were increasingly delegitimised because they were viewed as socially embedded rather than legally rational. As a result dispute resolution shifted from participatory local processes to a hierarchical instrument of governance whose institutional legacy continues to influence contemporary debates on legal decentralisation in India.²⁰

1.5.3 Decline of Panchayat Authority

The growth of colonial courts eroded Panchayat authority by confining customary law to limited spheres of personal law. Centralisation of fiscal and judicial power displaced village autonomy and redirected legal authority from community institutions to the colonial state leaving Panchayats largely informal and extra-legal by the late nineteenth century.²¹

1.6 1950–1957: CONSTITUTIONAL VISION AND EARLY EXPERIMENTS

The Constitution of India laid the normative foundation for decentralised justice through Article 40, which directed the State to organise village panchayats and endow them with authority necessary for self-government.²² Although the provision remained non justiciable it nevertheless reflected constitutional acknowledgement of Panchayats as institutions of

¹⁹ James Mill, *The History of British India* 102–113 (Longman, London 1817).

²⁰ Aayush Kumar and Anirudh Singh, “The Impact of Political Influence and Power on the Indian Judiciary” 9 *IJLS* 1.(2023)

²¹ C A Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* 114–138 (Cambridge University Press 1988).

²² Constitution of India, art 40.

grassroots governance. This recognition also extended to their potential role in local dispute resolution.

Several States began experimenting with Nyaya Panchayats, granting them limited jurisdiction over minor civil disputes and petty offences. These bodies aimed to provide inexpensive, speedy and accessible justice while reducing the burden on regular courts.²³

1.7 COMMITTEES AND PANCHAYATI RAJ(1957–1960S)

1.The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) marked a turning point in the development of Panchayats. While primarily focused on democratic decentralisation, it strongly endorsed Panchayats as institutions capable of resolving minor disputes through conciliation and adjudication.²⁴

Following the Committee's recommendations, several States enacted laws establishing Nyaya Panchayats with defined judicial powers. Their jurisdiction typically covered:

- Small civil claims
- Minor criminal offences
- Compromise-based settlements

Judicial functions during this phase emphasized mediation, reconciliation, and social harmony rather than adversarial adjudication.

2. Ashok Mehta Committee (1978)

The Ashok Mehta Committee proposed the Mandal Panchayat as the central unit of decentralised governance and recommended the establishment of Nyaya Panchayats with clearly defined judicial authority and professional support staff. These recommendations reflected a sophisticated appreciation of institutional capacity and the requirements of local justice delivery. However, their practical impact remained limited due to inadequate political commitment and uneven implementation.²⁵

3. G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985)

The G V K Rao Committee reaffirmed Panchayati Raj institutions as the principal framework for rural development and decentralised administration. It emphasised their central role in participatory grassroots governance rather than viewing them as marginal or auxiliary components of the state structure.²⁶

4 . L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986)

The L.M. Singhvi Committee made the most significant intervention in the evolution of Panchayati Raj by forcefully advocating constitutional status for these institutions. It further recommended the establishment of Nyaya Panchayats to institutionalise village-level justice

²³ JN Pandey, *The Constitutional Law of India* 594–598(50th edn, Central Law Agency, Allahabad 2013).

²⁴ Government of India, *Report of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee* (New Delhi, 1957).

²⁵ Mary Katzenstein, Smitu Kothari, and Uday Mehta, '10 Social Movement Politics in India: Institutions, Interests, and Identities' in *The Success of India's Democracy* 242(University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge 2001).

²⁶ G V K Rao, Shivraj Singh, G L Bailur, J C Jetli, Anil C Shah, Asim Dasgupta, G Ruma Reddy, and P C Joshi, *Report of the Committee to Observe the Existing Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation Programmes: CAARD* (Ministry of Agriculture, New Delhi 1985).

thereby providing the normative and institutional foundation for their subsequent constitutional recognition and legislative realisation.²⁷

1.8 DECLINE AND JUDICIAL CONCERNS 1970S–1980S

By the 1970s support for Nyaya Panchayats declined in many States due to inadequate legal training executive interference perceived caste bias and weak procedural safeguards. Judicial opinion increasingly cautioned against granting extensive adjudicatory authority to Panchayats without adequate institutional capacity legal expertise and effective supervisory oversight.²⁸ As a result, Panchayat justice increasingly shifted toward conciliation rather than adjudication.

1.9 73RD CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL REVIVAL 1992–1993

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992): Foundations of Modern Panchayat Justice

1. Constitutional Status

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 fundamentally transformed the status of Panchayats by inserting Part IX into the Constitution. Panchayats were recognised as institutions of self-government, with elected representation, fixed tenure, and constitutional protection.²⁹

2 The Eleventh Schedule

Items 4 and 11 of the Eleventh Schedule empower Panchayats to exercise authority in areas such as minor irrigation water management and the administration of community resources. They also relate to social welfare public distribution systems and the resolution of disputes connected with these local governance functions.³⁰

3 Article 243G: Powers of Panchayats

Article 243G of the Constitution of India authorises state legislatures to devolve powers to Panchayats for resolving local disputes performing limited judicial functions and exercising administrative adjudicatory authority. However the extent and effectiveness of this devolution have differed considerably among states. This variation reveals a continuing gap between constitutional possibilities and the actual functioning of decentralised justice institutions.³¹

In the post-73rd Amendment era, Panchayats increasingly function as:

- Mediatory and conciliatory bodies
- Grassroots dispute-resolution forums
- Community-based justice institutions

Many States enhanced the functioning of Nyaya Panchayats Gram Nyayalayas and Lok Adalats by linking Panchayat level justice with the formal judicial system. In this

²⁷ L M Singhvi Committee, *Report on Revitalisation of Panchayati Raj* (New Delhi, 1986).

²⁸ S N Mishra, *Panchayati Raj in India* 146–171 (Mittal Publications, 1989).

²⁹ Constitution of India, Part IX (arts 243–243O).

³⁰ Vishwa N Alok, 'Role of Panchayat Bodies in Rural Development Since 1959' in *Theme Paper for 55th Members' Annual Conference* (Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi 2011).

³¹ B. S. Baviskar and George Mathew (eds), *Inclusion and Exclusion in Local Governance: Field Studies from Rural India* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009).

arrangement Panchayats perform a complementary role by encouraging consensual settlement of disputes while more serious matters remain within the jurisdiction of regular courts.³²

Although the Amendment did not directly confer judicial powers, it revitalised Panchayats as forums for local dispute resolution. States were encouraged to establish mechanisms for village-level justice consistent with constitutional values of equality and fairness.

1.10 POST-1993 DEVELOPMENTS: PANCHAYATS AS FORUMS OF ALTERNATIVE JUSTICE

Judicial and Constitutional Developments Leading to the Gram Nyayalaya Act

1. Indian Judiciary on Access to Justice

The Supreme Court repeatedly emphasised access to justice as a fundamental right. In *Hussainara Khatoon v. Home Secretary Bihar* the Supreme Court affirmed that the right to a speedy trial is an integral component of the constitutional guarantee of personal liberty, thereby foregrounding access to timely justice as a fundamental right and reinforcing the normative case for decentralised and expeditious justice mechanisms.³³

In *Anita Kushwaha v. Pushap Sudan* (2016) the Supreme Court reaffirmed that access to justice constitutes a fundamental right, encompassing affordability, effectiveness, timeliness and the availability of appropriate adjudicatory mechanisms.³⁴

In *People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court emphasised that meaningful access to justice requires decentralised and accessible adjudicatory mechanisms, particularly for marginalised and disadvantaged groups, with effect that reinforcing the constitutional rationale for grassroots justice institutions.

2. Law Commission Reports

The 114th Law Commission Report exerted a formative influence on later reform initiatives by advocating the creation of village-level courts employing summary procedures, prioritising conciliation over adversarial adjudication and supported by effective legal aid frameworks. In doing so, it articulated a model of grassroots justice oriented toward accessibility, efficiency and social reconciliation rather than procedural formalism.³⁵

3. Justice Mulla Committee (1974)

The Justice Mulla Committee recommended the establishment of a network of rural courts designed to alleviate congestion in formal judicial institutions, foster participatory forms of justice and reintegrate indigenous panchayat traditions within a structured and legally supervised framework.³⁶

4. Judicial Backlog and Systemic Failures

By the early 2000s, the Indian judicial system faced acute structural stress, marked by the accumulation of over three crore pending cases, a disproportionately high population of

³² N R Madhava Menon, *Justice Delivery System in India: Reforming the System* 118–142 (National Law School of India University 2004).

³³ (1979) 3 SCC 532.

³⁴ (2016) 8 SCC 509.

³⁵ Parisa Praneetha, 'Critical Analysis of the 14th Law Commission Report in India' 2 *Indian Journal of Legal & Legal Research* 1.(2021)

³⁶ Arvind Verma and K. S. Subramanian, *Understanding the Police in India* (LexisNexis, New Delhi, 2009).

under-trial prisoners especially from rural communities and the prohibitive cost of litigation for economically marginalised groups. These systemic shortcomings exposed the limits of centralised adjudication and generated compelling momentum for comprehensive statutory reform aimed at expanding access to justice.

5. The Road to the Gram Nyayalaya Act, 2008

Experience demonstrated that Nyaya Panchayats could not function as effective alternatives to formal courts, primarily because they operated as administrative bodies lacking judicial independence, enforcement authority and institutional integration with the regular judiciary. Acknowledging these structural deficiencies policymakers advanced a new model of decentralised justicevillage-level courts that were judicially constituted, statutorily empowered, presided over by trained judicial officers and capable of blending conciliation with procedural legality. This reconceptualisation of grassroots justice ultimately culminated in the enactment of the Gram Nyayalaya Act.³⁷

Although British colonial rule significantly dismantled indigenous systems of justice, the normative and functional core of panchayat-based adjudication continued to operate informally within rural society. In the post-independence period, constitutional reforms, expert committees and policy debates converged on the recognition that the formal judicial system remained inaccessible and ineffective for large segments of the rural population. Nyaya Panchayats emerged as an important transitional experiment, in practice their administrative character, weak enforcement capacity, and limited judicial independence revealed the limits of purely decentralised models. This experience underscored the need for a hybrid institutional framework capable of combining the cultural legitimacy, accessibility and conciliatory ethos of panchayats with the procedural safeguards, enforceability and judicial independence of formal courts a need that ultimately found legislative expression in the Gram Nyayalaya Act.³⁸

The Gram Nyayalaya Act represents one of the most ambitious post-independence initiatives to institutionalise a hybrid model of local justice in India. It seeks to reconcile the cultural legitimacy and conciliatory, informal ethos of traditional panchayat-based dispute resolution with the institutional authority, procedural safeguards, and constitutional guarantees of the modern judiciary. The enactment of the Act reflects a systemic acknowledgment that the formal court structure characterised by chronic backlog, delay, high costs and urban bias is structurally ill-suited to address the justice needs of rural India where a substantial majority of the population resides.³⁹

It is also rooted in the jurisprudence of access to justice shaped by constitutional interpretation and the Supreme Court's expansion of Article 21.

1.12 GRAM NAYALAYA ACT, 2008

This Act contains forty sections eight chapters and two schedules. THE GRAM NYAYALAYAS ACT, 2008 ACT NO. 4 OF 2009 [7th January, 2009.] An Act to provide for the establishment of Gram Nyayalayas at the grass roots level for the purposes of providing access to justice to the citizens at their doorsteps and to ensure that opportunities

³⁷ Namrata Chakraborty, 'The Role of Nyaya Panchayat in Delivery of Rural Justice in India: A Critical Analysis' 3 *Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies Student Law Review* 83–93 (2021)

³⁸ Sachin Warwantkar, 'Nyaya Panchayat: Indigenous, Decentralised, Accessible, & Particularistic Mode of Dispute Resolution' 3 *Vidya – A Journal of Gujarat University* 113–116.(2024)

³⁹ National Judicial Data Grid (2022), *Caseload Statistics*, <https://njdg.ecourts.gov.in> accessed 15 September 2023.

for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of social, economic or other disabilities and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. The detailed structure of these provisions is presented below.

The **Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008** is systematically divided into eight chapters, each dealing with a distinct aspect of the establishment, jurisdiction, procedure, and administration of Gram Nyayalayas. **Chapter I (Preliminary)**, comprising **Section 2**, contains the definitions and other preliminary provisions necessary for interpreting the Act. **Chapter II (Gram Nyayalayas)**, covering **Sections 3 to 9**, provides for the establishment of Gram Nyayalayas, the appointment and service conditions of the Nyayadhikari, the location of the court, and the functioning of mobile courts to enhance access to justice in rural areas. **Chapter III (Jurisdiction, Powers and Authority of Gram Nyayalayas)**, encompassing **Sections 11 to 17**, defines the civil and criminal jurisdiction, powers, and authority of Gram Nyayalayas. **Chapter IV (Procedure in Criminal Cases)**, comprising **Sections 18 to 22**, prescribes the procedure for criminal trials, declares the Gram Nyayalaya to be a Court of Judicial Magistrate of the First Class, provides for summary trial proceedings, and incorporates the provisions relating to plea bargaining wherever applicable. **Chapter V (Procedure in Civil Cases)**, covering **Sections 23 to 28**, lays down the procedure for civil proceedings, execution of decrees and orders, and imposes a statutory duty upon the Gram Nyayalaya to promote conciliation and amicable settlement of disputes through the appointment of conciliators. **Chapter VI (Procedure Generally)**, comprising **Sections 29 to 32**, contains general procedural provisions relating to evidence and other matters applicable to both civil and criminal proceedings. **Chapter VII (Appeals)**, covering **Sections 33 and 34**, provides the appellate framework for civil and criminal judgments, decrees, and orders passed by Gram Nyayalayas. Finally, **Chapter VIII (Miscellaneous)**, comprising **Sections 35 to 40**, contains miscellaneous provisions relating to rule-making powers, protection of actions taken in good faith, removal of difficulties, and other ancillary matters essential for the effective implementation of the Act. Collectively, these chapters establish a comprehensive statutory framework for delivering accessible, inexpensive, and expeditious justice at the grassroots level.

SCHEDULE

THE FIRST SCHEDULE

PART I OFFENCES UNDER THE INDIAN PENAL CODE (45 OF 1860), ETC.

(i) offences not punishable with death, imprisonment for life or imprisonment for a term exceeding two years; (ii) theft, under section 379, section 380 or section 381 of the Indian Penal Code (45 of 1860), where the value of the property stolen does not exceed rupees twenty thousand; (iii) receiving or retaining stolen property, under section 411 of the Indian Penal Code (45 of 1860), where the value of the property does not exceed rupees twenty thousand; (iv) assisting in the concealment or disposal of stolen property, under section 414 of the Indian Penal Code (45 of 1860), where the value of such property does not exceed rupees twenty thousand; (v) offences under sections 454 and 456 of the Indian Penal Code (45 of 1860); (vi) insult with intent to provoke a breach of the peace, under section 504, and criminal intimidation, punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both, under section 506 of the Indian Penal Code (45 of 1860); (vii) abetment of any of the foregoing offences; (viii) an attempt to commit any of the foregoing offences, when such attempt is an offence.

PART II OFFENCES AND RELIEF UNDER THE OTHER CENTRAL ACTS

(i) any offence constituted by an act in respect of which a complaint may be made under section 20 of the Cattle-trespass Act, 1871(1 of 1871); (ii) the Payment of Wages Act, 1936 (4 of 1936); (iii) the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 (11 of 1948); (iv) the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 (22 of 1955); (v) order for maintenance of wives, children and parents under Chapter IX of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (2 of 1974); (vi) the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 (19 of 1976); (vii) the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (25 of 1976); (viii) the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (43 of 2005).

PART III OFFENCES AND RELIEF UNDER THE STATE ACTS

(To be notified by the State Government)⁴⁰

1.13 . LEGISLATIVE INTENT AND THE MAKING OF THE ACT

Structural Design of the Gram Nyayalaya Act, 2008

1 Establishment of Gram Nyayalayas (Section 3)

Section 3 of the Gram Nyayalaya Act authorises state governments, in consultation with the respective High Courts, to establish Gram Nyayalayas at the level of an intermediate panchayat or for a cluster of contiguous villages. Each Gram Nyayalaya is constituted as a criminal court vested with the powers of a Judicial Magistrate of the First Class, a civil court with limited pecuniary jurisdiction and a mobile court intended to operate directly within village communities.

2 Nyayadhikari (Section 5)

The presiding officer of a Gram Nyayalaya, known as the Nyayadhikari enjoys the powers and status of a Judicial Magistrate of the First Class. Appointed by the State Government in consultation with the High Court, the Nyayadhikari is required to reside within the territorial jurisdiction of the Gram Nyayalaya and to conduct mobile court proceedings within village areas. These design features seek to balance judicial independence with physical proximity and responsiveness to the local community reinforcing both credibility and accessibility in grassroots justice delivery.

3 Jurisdiction: Civil and Criminal

Criminal Jurisdiction (Schedule I)

The criminal jurisdiction of Gram Nyayalayas is confined to specified petty offences listed in Schedule I of the Gram Nyayalaya Act. These include minor offences such as simple hurt, wrongful restraint, low-value theft, criminal trespass, public nuisance and select offences under the Indian Penal Code and applicable local laws, reflecting the Act's focus on expeditious resolution of low-intensity criminal disputes at the grassroots level.⁴¹

Civil Jurisdiction (Schedule II)

Schedule II of the Gram Nyayalaya Act defines the civil jurisdiction of Gram Nyayalayas to include disputes concerning property, recovery of money, tenancy and crop-related issues, irrigation, boundary conflicts and minor family matters. Although this jurisdiction operates concurrently with that of ordinary civil courts, Gram Nyayalayas are distinguished by their

⁴⁰ https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/19258/1/gram_nyayalay_act_2008.pdf

⁴¹ *Gram Nyayalaya Act 2008*, sch I.

reliance on simplified, flexible and less formal procedural norms aimed at facilitating speedy and accessible justice.

1.14 . PROCEDURAL INNOVATIONS: ENSURING ACCESSIBLE AND SPEEDY JUSTICE

1 Relaxed Application of Procedural Law

Section 12 of the Gram Nyayalaya Act explicitly permits procedural flexibility in Gram Nyayalaya. The framework allows the use of simplified procedures, oral submissions and relaxed evidentiary requirements. It further authorises local investigations, site visits and the organisation of conciliation proceedings. It authorises the use of summary procedures, oral pleadings, relaxed evidentiary rules, local inquiries and site inspections, and the conduct of conciliation conferences. While the Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Criminal Procedure are not entirely excluded, they are applied in a simplified and adaptive manner to further the Act's objectives of efficiency, accessibility and expeditious justice at the grassroots level. The Act also provides for the conduct of **summary trials**, a provision expressly incorporated in **Chapter IV**, which governs the procedure in criminal cases before Gram Nyayalayas. This mechanism is intended to ensure the speedy and efficient disposal of criminal matters while maintaining the principles of natural justice.⁴²

2 Role of Conciliation (Sections 26–30)

Conciliation lies at the normative core of the Gram Nyayalaya Act. The Nyayadhikari is authorised to refer disputes to conciliation committees, involve respected community elders and local panchayat institutions, actively facilitate compromise and record settlements as legally enforceable decrees. This statutory prioritisation consciously echoes the traditional panchayat model of dispute resolution, which emphasises social harmony, restorative outcomes and relational repair over adversarial adjudication.

3 Mobile Courts

A defining feature of Gram Nyayalayas under the Gram Nyayalaya Act is their mobility. The Act requires courts to travel to villages, conduct sittings in accessible public spaces and adjudicate disputes within the communities where litigants reside. This design directly mitigates barriers arising from physical distance, transportation costs and the psychological intimidation commonly associated with urban court complexes, with the effect that advancing substantive access to justice.⁴³

4 Use of Local Language

To further enhance accessibility and comprehension, the Gram Nyayalaya Act permits proceedings, evidence and judicial orders to be conducted and recorded in the local language. This linguistic decentralisation demystifies legal processes and enables meaningful participation by rural litigants, reinforcing the Act's commitment to inclusive and user-oriented justice delivery.

5 Optional Legal Representation

Although legal representation is permitted, parties before a Gram Nyayalaya may appear in person, with procedures deliberately structured to facilitate lay participation at minimal cost.

⁴²*Id.*, at s 12.

⁴³ Rikhia Bhukta, Sarani Saha and Ashish Sedai, 'Justice at Doorstep: Mobile Courts and Gender-Based Violence' (2025) SSRN <https://ssrn.com/abstract=xxxxxx> accessed 10 February 2026.

This reduced reliance on legal professionals enhances accessibility and closely aligns the process with the participatory ethos of traditional panchayat-based justice.

1.15 . RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PANCHAYATS AND GRAM NYAYALAYAS

1 Panchayats as Complementary Institutions

The Gram Nyayalaya Act does not transform Panchayats into formal judicial authorities but recognises them as supportive institutions within the justice process. Their functions include facilitating conciliation assisting in fact finding promoting legal awareness aiding enforcement and reflecting community norms. Together Panchayats and Gram Nyayalayas operate as interconnected components of a pluralistic justice framework that combines formal adjudication with community based mechanisms.

2 Use of Panchayat as Customary Knowledge

During dispute resolution the Nyayadhikari may seek the views of Panchayat elders recognise prevailing customs and incorporate community norms into settlement processes. Reference may also be made to shared local knowledge regarding land boundaries patterns of land use and social relationships. Through this balanced approach traditional adjudicatory practices are revived within a framework governed by constitutional norms and judicial supervision.

3 Panchayats in Conciliation Committees

State governments may notify respected elders, local leaders, panchayat members, and social workers to act as conciliators, in doing so formalising the traditional panchayat ethos of reconciliation and embedding it within a statutory framework.

1.16 . FEDERAL STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORK

1 Role of State Governments

Under the Gram Nyayalaya Act, primary responsibility for establishing Gram Nyayalayas including the appointment of Nyayadhikaris, provision of infrastructure, and financing of operations rests with state governments.

2 Role of High Courts

Gram Nyayalayas remain subject to the supervisory authority of High Courts which monitor their functioning regulate the conduct of Nyayadhikaris and uphold judicial standards. This oversight also secures procedural compliance and preserves institutional integrity within the decentralised framework of justice delivery.

3 Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions

Panchayati Raj institutions support the functioning of Gram Nyayalayas by facilitating the notification of disputes, assisting in the service of summons, organising conciliation proceedings, and aiding in the enforcement of judicial orders. This arrangement represents a partial reintegration of panchayats into the formal justice delivery system positioning them as auxiliary actors within a decentralised and pluralistic judicial framework.

1.17 PRESENT STATUS OF GRAM NAYALAYA

As per information made available by State Governments / High Courts, 476 Gram Nyayalayas have been notified so far by 15 States. Out of these 256 are operational in 10 States at present. State-wise details of the Gram Nyayalayas notified, operationalised by the State Governments is as under:

Table 1: State/UT-wise Status of Gram Nyayalayas and Funds Released

Sl. No.	State/UT	Gram Nyayalayas Notified	Gram Nyayalayas Functional
1	Madhya Pradesh	89	89
2	Rajasthan	45	45
3	Kerala	30	30
4	Maharashtra	36	23
5	Odisha	23	19
6	Uttar Pradesh	113	43
7	Karnataka	2	2
8	Haryana	2	2
9	Punjab	9	2
10	Jharkhand	6	1
11	Goa	2	0
12	Andhra Pradesh	42	0
13	Telangana	55	0
14	Jammu & Kashmir	20	0
15	Ladakh	2	0
Total	15 States/UTs	476	256

Source: Department of Justice, Government of India (Gram Nyayalayas Scheme Data).

1.19. PANCHAYAT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF JUSTICE: ANCIENT AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

The Ancient Indian justice system demonstrates that Panchayats functioned as foundational institutions of local justice, where adjudication, mediation, and social regulation were collectively exercised. Civil disputes and minor criminal matters were generally resolved through consensus, guided by customary practices (*ācāra*) and principles of equity. Their authority derived from collective community participation which ensured accessibility and social harmony. Their legitimacy flowed from community participation rather than state authority. As J. D. M. Derrett observes, “village tribunals represented the living law of India rather than an imposed authority.”⁴⁴ However Panchayat justice was not without limitations as social hierarchy and caste dominance sometimes influenced decision making. The absence of uniform procedural safeguards could also place weaker sections at a disadvantage.

As observed, the colonial objective was directed towards dismantling indigenous self-governance and centralising judicial authority. Although Charles Metcalfe acknowledged Indian villages as “little republics,”⁴⁵ colonial policy systematically weakened Panchayats by transferring judicial authority to formal courts. Bernard S. Cohn notes that colonial law replaced community-based justice with bureaucratic adjudication to ensure imperial control.⁴⁶

Gram Nyayalaya Act, 2008 reveals a constitutional attempt to revive **accessible and local justice** in the spirit of traditional Panchayat adjudication while embedding it within the formal judicial framework. Gram Nyayalayas are designed to provide speedy, inexpensive justice through simplified procedures and conciliation⁴⁷. The Supreme Court in *State of Maharashtra v Labour Law Practitioners’ Association* recognised that access to justice at the grassroots is an essential component of Article 21. However, the Act suffers from weak

⁴⁴ Derrett, op. cit. 135–152.

⁴⁵ C Metcalfe, *Minute on Indian Village Communities*, reprinted in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*.(1830)

⁴⁶ Cohn, op. cit. 571–589.

⁴⁷ 1998 2 SCC 688.

implementation, inadequate infrastructure, limited jurisdiction, and over-reliance on existing magistracy. Scholars note that Gram Nyayalayas often function “as extensions of regular courts rather than community-rooted institutions,” diluting their transformative potential.

No sooner were Gram Nyayalayas introduced as a decentralising reform than they continued to operate within a colonial institutional inheritance, retaining colonial procedural norms, adversarial structures and state control unlike the autonomous Panchayats of the ancient Indian system. Upendra Baxi argues that modern access-to-justice reforms risk becoming “administrative justice delivery mechanisms rather than participatory justice systems.”⁴⁸ Gram Nyayalayas, therefore, represent a form of reform without complete decolonisation, as they appear constitutionally progressive while simultaneously remaining constrained by inherited structures of legal centralism.⁴⁹ The **Gram Nyayalaya Act, 2008** highlights its constitutional ambition to realise **Article 39A** and revive **decentralised access to justice**, echoing the spirit of traditional Panchayat justice. The Supreme Court has consistently emphasised that justice must reach the grassroots. In *State of Maharashtra v Labour Law Practitioners’ Association*⁵⁰ the Court held that **access to justice is an essential facet of Article 21**, justifying specialised and localised courts. Further, in *Imtiyaz Ahmad v State of Uttar Pradesh*,⁵¹ the Court recognised that delay and distance from courts deny effective justice, implicitly endorsing mechanisms like Gram Nyayalayas. However, poor implementation, inadequate staffing, and limited awareness have reduced Gram Nyayalayas to nominal institutions, often functioning as mobile magistrate courts rather than community-oriented forums. Despite decentralised intent, they retain adversarial procedures, state control, and formal legality. The Supreme Court in *Hussainara Khatoon v State of Bihar*⁵² warned that procedural formalism must not defeat substantive justice. Nevertheless, Gram Nyayalayas continue to mirror colonial judicial structures more than indigenous Panchayat justice. Thus, they represent constitutional reform constrained by inherited centralism.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the evolution of local justice in India reflects continuity in fundamental values despite significant institutional transformation. Ancient Panchayats served as accessible, participatory, and conciliatory forums rooted in dharma, custom, and community consensus. Their emphasis on mediation, compromise, and collective responsibility enabled the effective resolution of local disputes. However, these institutions were also constrained by caste hierarchies, social inequalities, and the absence of uniform procedural safeguards, which often resulted in unequal justice for marginalized sections of society.

The Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008 represents a constitutional adaptation of this indigenous tradition rather than a mere revival of the Panchayat system. While preserving the ideals of accessibility, affordability, decentralisation, and conciliation, Gram Nyayalayas function as statutory courts within the constitutional framework, ensuring procedural fairness, equality before law, judicial accountability, and protection of fundamental rights. This reflects a balanced integration of India's traditional dispute resolution mechanisms with the principles of a modern constitutional democracy.

⁴⁸ Upendra Baxi, ‘Taking Suffering Seriously’, op. cit. 107–132.

⁴⁹ N R Madhava Menon, “Access to Justice and the Gram Nyayalaya Act” 52 *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 475–492 (2010).

⁵⁰ 2002 4 SCC 556

⁵¹ 2012 2 SCC 688

⁵² 1979 3 SCC 532

Despite this progress, the effective functioning of Gram Nyayalayas remains limited due to weak implementation, inadequate infrastructure, restricted jurisdiction, and continued reliance on formal procedural practices inherited from the colonial judicial system. Furthermore, although the Act seeks to revive grassroots justice, it does not provide a judicial role for elected local representatives, unlike the traditional Panchayat system where respected community members actively participated in adjudication. This departure limits the restoration of the participatory character of indigenous justice.

Overall, the Gram Nyayalayas Act, 2008 marks an important constitutional step towards decentralised and affordable justice under Articles 21 and 39A of the Constitution. Its long-term success depends upon effective implementation, institutional strengthening, greater public awareness, and reforms that further reinforce its grassroots orientation while preserving constitutional safeguards.

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