

Reforms for India's District Courts

Mains Syllabus: GS II - Structure, organization and functioning of the Executive and the Judiciary.

Why in the News?

Recently a book on judicial reform "Tareekh Pe Justice: Reforms for India's District Courts (Simon & Schuster)" by Prashant Reddy T. and Chitrakshi Jain was released.

What are the significances of district and lower courts?

- District and lower courts are indispensable for delivering justice at the grassroots, maintaining the rule of law, and ensuring the judicial system functions efficiently and equitably across India.
- **First point of justice** - District and lower courts are the first and often the only point of contact for most Indian litigants.
- **Backbone of the judiciary** - They adjudicate the vast majority of civil and criminal cases across the country.
- District courts manage a substantial caseload, approximately 1.13 million cases daily.
- **Decentralized justice delivery** - These courts make justice more accessible and affordable for ordinary citizens, especially those in rural and remote areas.
- **Constitutional recognition and independence** - The independence of district judges is constitutionally protected, and the Supreme Court has emphasized their importance, rejecting the term "subordinate judiciary" to highlight their vital constitutional role.

What are the issues in lower judicial system?

- **Dilapidated facilities** - Over 40% of district and subordinate courts lack basic facilities such as modern computers, reliable internet, and video-conferencing equipment.
- Poor infrastructure is a major bottleneck affecting court efficiency and access to justice
- **Burgeoning case backlogs** - A significant backlog exists, with approximately 4.14 to 4.5 crore (41-45 million) cases pending in district and subordinate courts across India.
- Some cases have been pending for over 30 years, severely delaying justice delivery.
- **Shortage of judicial personnel** - Around 30% of judicial posts in district and subordinate courts remain vacant.
- **Procedural delays** - Frequent adjournments, stay orders from higher courts, and difficulties in securing witness presence cause additional delays.
- **Threat of retribution** - Former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud said that

district judges operate under the looming threat of retribution, acutely aware that delivering a verdict perceived as unpalatable to the ruling dispensation could invite disciplinary proceedings.

- **Culture of opacity** - Lack of transparency and accountability in its functioning leads to concerns about public trust and the integrity of the system.
- **Data unreliability** - National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG) disclaimer states that the data displayed is for informational purposes and should not be considered legal evidence.
- It also states that data may contain errors or omissions due to various reasons, including data transmission issues.

What are the reforms required?

- Meaningful judicial reforms must begin at the level of the district courts.
- Jury trials can be reintroduced to foster civic engagement.
- Procedural law can be strengthened in ensuring fairness and predictability in adjudication.
- Re-engineering court procedures will simplify court procedures, improve case management, and reduce delays in case disposal.
- Improving court infrastructure, including better facilities for courtrooms and judicial staff, is crucial.
- Expanding the use of virtual courts for certain types of cases (like traffic violations) can reduce the need for physical court appearances.

Reference

[The Hindu | Reimagining access to justice and rectifying systemic barriers](#)

[For Mains practice question, click here](#)