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FROM QUEUE TO GRAPH: DIAGNOSING BOTTLENECKS IN INDIAN HIGH COURTS

AUTHORED BY – JOY BOSE
LLM Student, Golden Gate University, San Francisco, USA

Abstract

When people talk about judicial delay in India, the usual explanation is simple: too many cases, too few judges. But this paper argues that different courts are failing in different ways, and that the same solution cannot fix all of them. We looked at over 24 lakh writ petition records from ten Indian High Courts and found three distinct patterns of failure. In six courts, cases are admitted but never get a hearing date, instead they simply wait in a queue that never moves. In two courts, cases are being heard regularly but there is not enough time for all the matters listed. In two courts, arguments are complete and the judge has reserved the case for a written judgment, but the judgment is not delivered for months or years. A policy that adds more judges will help the first two types of court but will do nothing for the third type, where the problem is not hearing time but the delay in writing and delivering judgments. The paper also shows that the time taken to decide a case varies enormously across courts, from 146 days in Chhattisgarh to 3,792 days in Calcutta, and that courts use such different language to record case stages that direct comparison is impossible without careful translation. The conclusion is that meaningful judicial reform must begin with an accurate diagnosis of each court's specific problem, not a one-size-fits-all national prescription.

LIST OF CASES

Hussainara Khatoon v. Home Secretary, State of Bihar (1979) 1 SCC 98

P. Ramachandra Rao v. State of Karnataka (2002) 4 SCC 578

ABBREVIATIONS

HC – High Court

NJDG – National Judicial Data Grid (the government's online case statistics portal)

DAKSH – A civil society organisation that has collected and published court case data

CrPC – Code of Criminal Procedure

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CAT – Central Administrative Tribunal

SDI – Stage Disorder Index (a measure used in this paper to compare how consistently courts record case stages)

IMLJD – Indian Matrimonial Litigation Judgment Dataset (a publicly available set of court judgments used for supplementary analysis)

KEYWORDS: Judicial Pendency, Indian High Courts, Case Backlog, Writ Petitions, Judicial Reform, Court Administration, Admission Bottleneck, Judgment Delay, DAKSH Data.

I. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

India's courts are said to have around 44 million pending cases. This figure is repeated so often that it has almost lost its power to shock. But the figure by itself tells us very little, because it does not tell us why cases are pending. Are they pending because no one has scheduled a hearing? Because hearings keep happening but nothing moves forward? Because the judge has heard everything and written nothing? These are entirely different problems, and they call for entirely different solutions.

The standard policy answer in India is to appoint more judges and build more courtrooms. This may be the right answer for some courts. But this paper argues that it is certainly the wrong answer for others, and that applying the same solution everywhere wastes resources and delays genuine reform.

To make this argument concrete, we examined the records of writ petitions, the most common form of public interest and rights-based litigation, from ten Indian High Courts. The data was drawn from the DAKSH High Court Data Portal, which is the main publicly available source of court case records in India. After studying over 24 lakh such cases, we found that courts fall into three clear groups based on where their cases are getting stuck.

In the first group, which includes six courts, the problem is at the admission stage: cases are filed, they are admitted, but they are never given a hearing date. They simply pile up in an admission queue with no movement. In the second group, two courts, cases have been admitted and are being called for hearing, but there are simply too many matters and not enough sitting

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time to hear them all. In the third group, also two courts, the situation is different: cases are actually being heard, arguments are concluded, and the judge has reserved the matter for a written judgment. But the judgment is not being delivered. The file sits on the judge's table for months or years.

This distinction has direct implications for policy. Appointing more judges will help the first and second groups, where the shortage of judicial time is the core problem. But it will not help the third group at all. A judge who is not writing judgments will not write faster merely because there are more judges sitting in adjacent courtrooms.

1.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.2.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The research problem is simple: India's judicial reform policies treat all High Courts as if they are failing for the same reason. This paper demonstrates, using publicly available case data, that they are not. The nature of the failure differs from court to court, and reform prescriptions must follow suit.

1.2.2 HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis of this paper is that Indian High Courts can be classified into distinct groups based on where cases are accumulating, and that the appropriate reform for each group is different. In particular, the paper hypothesises that courts where cases are held up waiting for a written judgment will not benefit from appointment of additional judges, whereas courts where cases are waiting for a first hearing will benefit directly.

1.2.3 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are: to identify, for each of the ten High Courts studied, where in the case journey cases are accumulating; to measure how long cases are actually taking at each court; to examine how courts record case stages and whether their records can be compared; and to draw specific policy conclusions that vary by court type rather than being applied uniformly across all courts.

1.2.4 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several scholars have previously studied judicial delay in India using court statistics. Verma et

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al. (2023)[1] used the government's case statistics portal to project how long it would take each High Court to clear its backlog at current disposal rates, finding that some courts would take over a century. Verma (2023)[2] also documented significant errors in the data published by the government portal itself. Daksh India (2016)[3] and the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy[4] found that vacancies on the bench, the type of cases being filed, and the economic development of the state all affect how quickly courts dispose of cases. Bakshi, Kim, and Randhawa (2025)[5] studied the Supreme Court of India and found that simply shifting some of the time spent on routine admission hearings to substantive merit hearings could cut average case resolution time by 65%, without any additional judges. This finding supports the central argument of the present paper: the problem is not simply numbers of judges but how judicial time is used. Moog (2016)[6] argued that the persistence of delay reflects incentive problems: lawyers benefit financially from delay, registry staff informally control case listings, and judges face little pressure to clear old cases. The Law Commission of India's 245th Report (2014)[7] called for stricter limits on adjournments, more judges, and mandatory pre-litigation mediation. The Supreme Court has held in *Hussainara Khatoon* (1979) and *P. Ramachandra Rao* (2002)[8] that speedy trial and speedy justice are fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution. More recently, researchers have found that the raw case data published by courts contains serious errors: Damle and Anand (2020)[9] and Jain and Reddy (2025)[10] documented widespread missing dates, incorrect records, and inflated pendency counts. The present paper encounters similar problems and documents them in detail.

1.2.5 METHODOLOGY

This paper uses publicly available case records. The main source is the DAKSH High Court Data Portal, which provides details of individual cases including filing date, current stage,

[1]Verma, K. et al. (2023). Estimating Time to Clear Pendency of Cases in High Courts in India using Linear Regression. arXiv:2307.12549.
[2]Verma, K. (2023). Analyzing HC-NJDG Data to Understand Pendency in High Courts in India. arXiv:2307.10615.
[3]Daksh India (2016). Access to Justice Survey. https://dakshindia.org
[4]National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, studies on judicial productivity (various years).
[5]Bakshi, A., Kim, S.-H., and Randhawa, R. (2025). Service Operations for Justice-on-Time. Manufacturing and Service Operations Management, 27(1), 305–321.
[6]Moog, R. (2016). Uncorking the Bottlenecks: Using Political Economy Analysis to Address Court Delay. CMI Working Paper.
[7]Law Commission of India (2014). Report No. 245: Arrears and Backlog. Government of India.
[8]Hussainara Khatoon v. Home Secretary, State of Bihar (1979) 1 SCC 98; P. Ramachandra Rao v. State of Karnataka (2002) 4 SCC 578.
[9]Damle, S. and Anand, K. (2020). Problems with the e-Courts Data. NIPFP Working Paper No. 314.
[10]Jain, A. and Reddy, K. (2025). Beyond Pendency: Counting Cases Correctly. The Leap Blog.

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number of hearings, outcome if disposed, and the name of the party against whom the case was filed. We downloaded these records for all ten available High Courts, giving us a combined dataset of over 24 lakh writ petition cases.

For each court, we looked at where the bulk of currently pending cases were sitting in the case process: at the admission stage, at the hearing stage, or at the judgment stage. This allowed us to classify each court by its dominant problem type. We also measured how long cases were actually taking, using the filing date and disposal date where these were reliably recorded. We examined how each court labels the stages of a case and developed a simple score to measure how consistent and comparable those labels are. Finally, we tested whether our classification held up under different assumptions, to make sure our conclusions were not dependent on one particular way of drawing lines.

1.3 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study covers writ petitions only. Civil suits, criminal cases, and matters transferred from tribunals may show different patterns and have not been examined here. The case records cover filings up to around 2021. Two courts, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, have a systematic error in their filing date data that makes it impossible to calculate how long their cases have been pending, and they have been excluded from that part of the analysis. The classification of courts by problem type is based on a snapshot of where cases are sitting at a particular point in time; it does not track how individual cases move through the system.

II. THE DATA

2.1 THE DAKSH HIGH COURT DATA PORTAL

DAKSH India is a civil society organisation that collected case records from Indian High Courts and made them publicly available for research.[11] For each case, the data includes a unique case number, the type of case, dates of filing and disposal (where the case has been decided), the current stage in the process, how many hearings have taken place, and the name of the opposing party. We used the writ petition records for all ten courts available on the portal. Table 1 below sets out the basic details of each dataset along with the court's problem classification.

[11]DAKSH India, High Court Data Portal, database.dakshindia.org. The data is freely available to researchers after registration.

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Table 1: Courts Studied, Dataset Size, and Problem Classification

Court	File Size	Cases	Period	Problem Type	Largest Group of Waiting Cases
Allahabad HC	251 MB	820,114	Up to 2021	Admission	Admitted but unscheduled – 72.2%
Andhra Pradesh HC	92 MB	255,322	Up to 2021	Admission	Admitted but unscheduled – 53.8%
Calcutta HC	84 MB	272,322	Up to 2021	Admission	Admitted but unscheduled – 63.5%
Chhattisgarh HC	69 MB	194,053	Up to 2021	Hearing	Waiting for bench time – 61.4%
Jammu & Kashmir HC	90 MB	251,556	Up to 2021	Judgment	Reserved, judgment not delivered – 25.7%
Karnataka HC	112 MB	367,275	Up to 2021	Admission	Admitted but unscheduled – 46.5%
Kerala HC	35 MB	113,993	Up to 2021	Hearing	Waiting for bench time – 58.8%
Manipur HC	8 MB	20,498	Up to 2021	Admission	Admitted but unscheduled – 59.2%
Meghalaya HC	3 MB	8,930	Up to 2021	Judgment	Reserved, judgment not delivered – 47.8%
Uttarakhand HC	51 MB	147,331	Up to 2021	Admission	Admitted but unscheduled – 50.3%
TOTAL		2,451,398			

2.2 PROBLEMS WITH THE DATA

Before presenting the findings, it is important to be honest about several problems we found in the underlying data. Other researchers using this data will face the same problems, and documenting them clearly is itself a contribution to the field.

Problem 1: Incorrect filing dates in two courts. In both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, a large number of cases show a pending duration of exactly 20,599 days, which works out to over 56

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years. This is clearly not a real figure, instead it is a placeholder that the registry used when the actual filing date was not known. Any analysis that does not remove these records will produce completely misleading figures for these two courts. We identified and removed them, but it means we cannot calculate how long Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh cases are actually taking.

Problem 2: A language encoding problem in the Jammu and Kashmir file. The J&K data file uses a different character encoding from the other courts, because some party names are recorded in regional languages. Any researcher trying to open this file with standard settings will find it unreadable. This is a minor technical issue but would cause a complete failure in any automated analysis that did not specifically account for it.

Problem 3: Each court uses its own language to describe case stages. There is no standard national vocabulary. Calcutta uses the word 'MOTION' for what all other courts call 'ADMISSION'. Uttarakhand adds a hearing slot number to every stage label, so you see entries like 'ADMISSION MATTERS – 25'. Andhra Pradesh adds the name of the government department involved. This means that before any comparison can be made across courts, all these labels must be translated into a common set of terms. We also note that Allahabad and Karnataka have not filled in the disposal reason field for any case, making it impossible to study how cases are being closed in those courts.

2.3 SUPPLEMENTARY DATA: KARNATAKA JUDGMENTS

Because the DAKSH filing date data for Karnataka is unreliable, we used a separate dataset of Karnataka High Court judgments[12] to get a partial picture of how long cases there are taking. This supplementary data covers criminal petitions under Section 482 of the Code of Criminal Procedure — a simpler and faster category of case than constitutional writ petitions — decided between 2018 and 2024. The figures from this data cannot be directly compared with the writ petition figures from other courts, but they reveal an important pattern about the impact of the COVID-19 shutdown on case durations, which is discussed in Section V.

[12]Indian Matrimonial Litigation Judgment Dataset (IMLJD), available at huggingface.co/datasets/joyboseroy/imljd. Note: this dataset was compiled by the author.

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III. HOW WE CLASSIFIED THE COURTS

3.1 THE THREE PROBLEM TYPES

A court case passes through several stages: filing, admission, notice to the other side, hearing of arguments, and finally delivery of a written judgment. At any stage, cases can pile up if the court is not able to move them forward quickly enough. Wherever the pile-up is largest, that is the court's main problem. This logic is consistent with a well-known principle from management science: in any multi-stage system, the stage where work accumulates the most is the stage where the rate of progress is slowest relative to the rate at which new work arrives.[13]

We defined three problem types based on where the largest share of pending cases was sitting:

Admission Problem: More than 45 out of every 100 pending cases are sitting at the admission stage waiting for a first hearing date, or more than 80 out of every 100 pending cases have never had a single hearing. Cases are being filed and registered but are not progressing.

Hearing Problem: More than 50 out of every 100 pending cases are at the arguments stage. Cases have been admitted and are being called, but there is not enough sitting time to hear them all.

Judgment Problem: More than 15 out of every 100 pending cases have been fully argued and reserved for judgment, but the written judgment has not been delivered. Cases are being heard; the delay is in the writing.

3.2 TRANSLATING STAGE LABELS INTO A COMMON LANGUAGE

Because each court uses its own vocabulary for case stages, we had to translate all stage labels into a common set before comparing courts. We used a reference list that mapped each court's local terminology to a standard set of stages: Filed, Admitted, Noticed, Counter-affidavit stage, Arguments, Reserved for judgment, Decided, Withdrawn, and Other. For each court we also identified court-specific patterns: for example, everything Calcutta called 'MOTION' was treated as Admitted, and in Uttarakhand the slot numbers were stripped off before matching.

[13]Little, J.D.C. (1961). A Proof of the Queueing Formula L = λW. Operations Research, 9(3), 383–387. This is a standard result from management science: the number of items waiting in any system is proportional to how long each item waits.

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Any label we could not match was counted as 'Other'. Courts where a high proportion of labels fell into the 'Other' category were noted as having less reliable classifications, because a significant share of their cases could not be properly placed in the process.

3.3 THE STAGE DISORDER SCORE

To give a simple summary of how consistently each court records its case stages, we developed what we call a Stage Disorder Score. A court with a low score uses a small, clear, and consistent set of stage labels. A court with a high score uses a large, fragmented, and inconsistent vocabulary. The score is based on three things: how many different stage labels the court uses, how many of its labels we could not match to a standard stage, and how many cases appear stuck at the admission stage despite having had multiple hearings (which suggests the label is not accurately reflecting what is actually happening with the case).

Importantly, the Stage Disorder Score does not measure court performance. A court can have a chaotic vocabulary and still dispose of cases quickly, and a court can have a clean and consistent vocabulary and still have very long delays. The score measures the quality of the court's administrative records, not the quality of its justice.

3.4 MEASURING WITHDRAWALS

One signal of how much pressure litigants are under is how many cases are withdrawn rather than decided on merits. A high withdrawal rate relative to merit decisions may mean that litigants, facing years of waiting, are giving up on obtaining a court ruling. We calculated this withdrawal ratio for the seven courts where the disposal reason was recorded in the data.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 HOW THE TEN COURTS WERE CLASSIFIED

Six of the ten courts have an Admission Problem. Two have a Hearing Problem. Two have a Judgment Problem. None showed the fourth theoretical type, which would be a problem at the evidence-gathering stage, because writ petitions in India are generally argued on affidavits rather than through lengthy trials. These classifications, along with the data for each court, are set out in Table 1 above.

4.2 ALLAHABAD: THE LARGEST ADMISSION PROBLEM

Allahabad High Court is the largest court in the study, with over 8.2 lakh writ petition records.

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Of its currently pending cases, 72 out of every 100 are sitting at the admission stage waiting for a hearing date. The typical case takes just over 8 years to be decided. Over 43 out of every 100 pending cases have been waiting for more than 10 years. Yet the court keeps relatively clean and simple administrative records: it uses only 24 different stage labels and scores low on the Stage Disorder Score. The records are orderly. The problem is not record-keeping; it is that there is no practical pathway from admission to a scheduled hearing at the rate needed to keep up with new filings. Government departments and agencies are the opposing party in 58 out of every 100 Allahabad cases, the second-highest proportion in the study.

4.3 CALCUTTA: RECORD-KEEPING CHAOS AND THE SLOWEST COURT

Calcutta High Court has the longest median case duration in the study: 3,792 days, or just over ten years. It also uses 350 different stage labels, more than 21 times as many as Meghalaya, the court with the fewest. Many of these labels are variations of the same stage: 'MOTION', 'NEW MOTION', 'LISTED MOTION', 'MOTION 1', 'MOTION 2', 'CIVIL NEW MOTION' all refer to what other courts simply call an admission hearing. Most strikingly, 93 out of every 100 Calcutta cases have no hearing recorded at all. This may mean hearings are happening but not being entered into the system, or it may mean cases are genuinely not being called. The data does not allow us to distinguish between these possibilities. Government departments are the opposing party in 69 out of every 100 Calcutta cases, the highest in the study.

4.4 MEGHALAYA AND JAMMU AND KASHMIR: THE JUDGMENT PROBLEM

Meghalaya and Jammu and Kashmir are the two courts with a Judgment Problem. Both courts are actually functioning well at the hearing stage: Meghalaya has a very low rate of cases with no hearings, and J&K has the lowest rate of all ten courts. Cases are being heard. In Meghalaya, nearly 48 out of every 100 pending cases are waiting for a written judgment. In J&K, over 25 out of every 100 are in the same position.

For these courts, appointing more judges will not help. The constraint is not the number of hearings that can be conducted, rather it is the time it takes after arguments are concluded for a written judgment to be produced and delivered. This happens outside the courtroom and is not accelerated by adding judicial strength.

Meghalaya also has the highest withdrawal rate in the study: for every two cases decided on merits, more than one is withdrawn. This is consistent with the possibility that the long wait

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for a judgment is causing some litigants to give up before the court rules. A special note on J&K: around 5,264 of its pending cases, about 12 out of every 100, are listed as pending because they are waiting to be transferred to the Central Administrative Tribunal. These cases are not waiting for a judge; they are waiting for an administrative decision. Including them in the pendency count makes J&K look worse than it is on judicial performance.

4.5 CHHATTISGARH AND KERALA: THE HEARING PROBLEM

Chhattisgarh and Kerala are the two courts with a Hearing Problem. Their pending cases are concentrated at the arguments stage, meaning cases have been admitted and are being scheduled, but there is simply not enough sitting time to complete all of them promptly. Chhattisgarh is actually doing well despite this: its typical case takes only 146 days, the shortest in the study, and only 7.5 out of every 100 cases have been pending for more than ten years. The backlog at the arguments stage is large but appears to be manageable. Kerala is more concerning: its typical case takes 700 days, and nearly 24 out of every 100 pending cases have been waiting for more than ten years. Kerala keeps the clearest case records of any large court in the study. The problem is not administrative; it is a genuine shortage of bench time.

4.6 HOW LONG CASES ACTUALLY TAKE

Table 2 shows the typical (median) time to decide a case for the eight courts where filing date data is reliable. Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are excluded because their filing date data is corrupted, as explained in Section II.

Table 2: Typical Case Duration by Court

Court	Median Days	Median Years	Problem Type	Note
Chhattisgarh HC	146	0.4	Hearing	Fastest court
Meghalaya HC	162	0.4	Judgment	
Uttarakhand HC	195	0.5	Admission	
Manipur HC	328	0.9	Admission	
Kerala HC	700	1.9	Hearing	
J&K HC	1,013	2.8	Judgment	
Allahabad HC	2,930	8.0	Admission	
Calcutta HC	3,792	10.4	Admission	Slowest court

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The difference between the fastest court (Chhattisgarh at 146 days) and the slowest (Calcutta at 3,792 days) is 26-fold. These two courts operate under the same Constitution and the same procedural rules. One resolves the typical writ petition in under five months. The other takes more than ten years. No single national policy can fix both of these situations simultaneously. The cure for Calcutta is irrelevant to Chhattisgarh, and vice versa.

4.7 HOW CONSISTENTLY COURTS RECORD CASE STAGES

Table 3 shows the Stage Disorder Score for all ten courts. As explained in Section III, a higher score means more fragmented and harder-to-compare record-keeping. The score does not measure how well the court is performing; Uttarakhand has a relatively high score partly because it adds hearing slot numbers to every stage label (which inflates the number of different labels), and Andhra Pradesh has the highest score largely because it appends department names. Both of these are administrative quirks, not signs of poor judicial performance.

Table 3: Stage Disorder Scores by Court

Court	Disorder Score	No. of Stage Labels	Unlabelled Rate	Problem Type	Note
Meghalaya HC	0.85	16	62.5%	Judgment	Fewest labels
Allahabad HC	0.88	24	40.3%	Admission	
Chhattisgarh HC	0.92	33	69.1%	Hearing	
J&K HC	1.09	35	3.0%	Judgment	Clearest labels
Karnataka HC	1.10	125	21.0%	Admission	
Kerala HC	1.11	54	1.2%	Hearing	Cleanest large court
Calcutta HC	1.19	350	69.7%	Admission	Most labels
Uttarakhand HC	1.19	100	8.2%	Admission	Slot numbers inflate score
Manipur HC	1.29	37	50.3%	Admission	
Andhra Pradesh HC	1.85	243	5.5%	Admission	Dept names inflate score

There is no meaningful relationship between a court's Stage Disorder Score and its disposal rate. A court with chaotic records can still dispose of cases quickly, and a court with tidy records

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can still be extremely slow. The score measures the quality of court administration, not the quality of justice.

4.8 HOW MANY LITIGANTS ARE GIVING UP

Table 4 shows, for the seven courts where the data is available, how many cases are withdrawn compared to how many are decided on merits. A high withdrawal rate may indicate that litigants are abandoning their cases rather than waiting years for a result.

Table 4: Withdrawal Rates by Court

Court	Cases Withdrawn (%)	Cases Decided on Merits (%)	Withdrawal Ratio	Note
Meghalaya HC	7.5%	3.8%	0.53	Highest withdrawal rate
Manipur HC	6.7%	3.8%	0.47	
Uttarakhand HC	3.5%	8.9%	0.35	
Andhra Pradesh HC	3.0%	6.9%	0.32	
Chhattisgarh HC	4.2%	8.9%	0.32	
J&K HC	2.7%	6.9%	0.20	
Kerala HC	1.8%	4.5%	0.16	
Calcutta HC	0.5%	1.1%	0.06	Data too sparse to rely on
Allahabad HC	–	–	–	Data not recorded
Karnataka HC	–	–	–	Data not recorded

Meghalaya and Manipur, both courts with high proportions of cases involving government as the opposing party, also have the highest withdrawal rates. The pattern is suggestive: when the opposing party is a government department, cases may take longer to resolve, and litigants may be more likely to walk away. However, this could also reflect local legal culture or the nature of cases being filed, so the finding should be treated as a preliminary observation rather than a firm conclusion.

4.9 SENSITIVITY CHECK

We tested whether our classification of courts changed if we used slightly different percentage

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thresholds for defining each problem type. Nine of the ten courts were classified the same way regardless of how we adjusted the thresholds. The only borderline case was Karnataka, which sits just above the cut-off for the Admission Problem classification and would be classified as mixed under slightly tighter thresholds. All other findings are robust.

V. SUPPLEMENTARY EVIDENCE

5.1 KARNATAKA: WHAT THE SUPPLEMENTARY DATA SHOWS

Because we could not use the DAKSH data to calculate case durations for Karnataka, we turned to a separate dataset of Karnataka High Court judgments in criminal petition cases. These are procedurally simpler and generally faster than writ petitions, so the figures cannot be directly compared with those in Table 2. However, they reveal a striking pattern, shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Karnataka HC Criminal Petitions – Time to Decision by Year Filed

Year Filed	No. of Cases	Median Days to Decision	Note
2018	included	282	
2019	included	1,211	COVID shutdown hit mid-case
2020	included	728	Partial recovery
2022	included	268	Near-normal again
2023	included	127	Pre-COVID levels restored
2024	included	252	

Cases filed in 2019 took, on average, 1,211 days to be decided, which is roughly four times longer than cases filed in any other year. The reason is the COVID-19 shutdown: cases that were in progress when courts physically closed in March 2020 were left suspended for an extended period. By 2022 and 2023, durations had returned to near-normal levels. This shows that case durations are sensitive to sudden disruptions in ways that simple trend projections cannot capture. Forecasts built on pre-COVID data would have completely failed to predict the spike, and forecasts built on COVID-period data would have been equally misleading about the normal situation.

5.2 THE ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSFER CASES IN J&K

As noted in Section IV, around 5,264 pending cases in J&K are classified as waiting for transfer

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to the Central Administrative Tribunal. These are not pending in any judicial sense, i.e. there is no queue, no hearing to be scheduled, no judgment to be written. They are simply waiting for an administrative file transfer that has not happened. Including such cases in any court's pendency count is misleading. National pendency statistics that do not distinguish between judicially pending cases and administratively stuck cases cannot be used to design sensible reforms.

VI. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 DIFFERENT PROBLEMS NEED DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS

The three types of courts identified in this paper need three different types of intervention.

Courts with an Admission Problem (Allahabad, Calcutta, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Uttarakhand) need better case scheduling at the front end. This means faster processing of admitted cases onto hearing lists, better diary management, or measures to reduce the number of new cases being filed (such as making government departments more willing to settle routine service matters without litigation).

Courts with a Hearing Problem (Chhattisgarh, Kerala) need more available sitting time. Appointing additional judges or creating additional benches would help here. Better scheduling of hearing time, so that fewer listed matters are adjourned, would also contribute.

Courts with a Judgment Problem (Meghalaya, J&K) need measures directed specifically at the gap between the completion of arguments and the delivery of a written judgment. This might include mandatory time limits on the delivery of reserved judgments, internal tracking systems that flag files where arguments are complete but no judgment has issued, and administrative support for judges in drafting. None of these interventions requires additional judges.

6.2 WHY SIMPLY APPOINTING MORE JUDGES IS NOT ENOUGH

The dominant reform prescription in Indian judicial policy is to fill vacant judicial posts. For courts with an Admission Problem or a Hearing Problem, this is a sensible intervention: more judges mean more courtrooms, more sitting time, and faster movement of cases from admission to hearing. But for courts with a Judgment Problem, it is irrelevant. In Meghalaya and J&K, cases are being heard. The delay is not in the courtroom; it is at the judge's desk after arguments are over. Adding judges who will hear more cases but similarly hold reserved judgments on

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their desks for months will not solve the problem.

This is a testable prediction: if we track judicial vacancy filling in Meghalaya and J&K over the coming years and find that disposal rates do not improve despite new appointments, it will confirm that the classification in this paper is correct. If disposal rates do improve, the classification would need to be revisited.

6.3 THE PROBLEM WITH THE AVAILABLE DATA

A secondary finding of this paper is that the data available for studying Indian High Courts is seriously inadequate. Two courts have filing date errors that make duration analysis impossible. Every court uses a different vocabulary for case stages, making cross-court comparison extremely difficult. The reason a case was disposed, whether it was decided on merits, withdrawn, or dismissed for non-prosecution, is not recorded for two of the largest courts. There is no standard national vocabulary for case stages. The government's own data portal does not include, at the High Court level, a field recording why cases are delayed.

These gaps are not minor technical issues. They are the reason why serious policy analysis of Indian High Courts is so difficult. Aggregate statistics, including total pendency, disposal rate, vacancies filled, can be calculated from the existing data, but structural analysis of the kind presented in this paper requires far more detailed and consistent records than currently exist.

6.4 WHAT MINIMUM DATA IS NEEDED

Based on the analysis in this paper, we identify six specific improvements to court data that would make structural diagnosis possible across all Indian courts:

First, a standard national vocabulary for case stages, maintained by the eCommittee of the Supreme Court and applied uniformly to all High Courts. Second, a field recording the reason for delay in each case, with a standard set of options (court's own schedule, counsel's request, party's request, pending investigation). Third, a separate field recording the date on which a case was reserved for judgment, so that the time from end of arguments to delivery of judgment can be calculated. Fourth, proper filing dates for all cases, with a clear marker where the date is genuinely unknown rather than a placeholder number. Fifth, a disposal reason field filled in for every case that is closed. Sixth, a flag to distinguish cases that are pending for judicial reasons from cases that are pending because an administrative order, such as a file transfer, has

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not been executed. All six of these improvements are achievable within the existing court record-keeping systems. None of them requires building new technology.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined over 24 lakh writ petition records from ten Indian High Courts and found that they are not all failing in the same way. Six courts have an Admission Problem: cases are admitted but not scheduled for hearing. Two have a Hearing Problem: cases are being called but there is not enough sitting time. Two have a Judgment Problem: arguments are complete but written judgments are not being delivered. The typical case duration ranges from 146 days in the fastest court to 3,792 days in the slowest, showing a 26-fold difference between courts operating under identical legal frameworks.

The implications for policy are straightforward. Treating all courts as if they have the same problem will not fix them. A court that needs better scheduling at the admission stage will not benefit from a rule requiring faster delivery of reserved judgments. A court that needs faster judgment delivery will not benefit from more judges being appointed. Effective reform requires, first, an accurate picture of what is actually going wrong in each court; and second, interventions designed for that specific problem.

This paper provides a method for obtaining that picture using publicly available data. The method is imperfect, partly because the data itself is imperfect, and we have documented those imperfections in detail. Improving the data should be the first priority, because without better data the diagnosis cannot be refined and the reforms cannot be properly evaluated.

The findings in this paper apply to writ petitions only. Other categories of cases such as civil suits, criminal matters, and matters transferred from tribunals, may show different patterns and should be examined in future research. The data covers filings up to 2021, and conditions may have changed since then. The paper should be read as a diagnostic exercise and a methodological contribution, not as a definitive verdict on any particular court.

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