

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

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**THE LITERAL. THE GOLDEN RULE AND THE MISCHIEF
RULE: A COMPARISON LOOKING AT HOW THEY WORK
TOGETHER WITH A SPECIAL LOOK AT WHAT INDIAN
COURTS HAVE SAID BEFORE.**

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A. ABSTRACT:

Statutory interpretation continues to be a crucial part of the judicial role as laws are generally worded, but issues arise from very specific facts. As a result, courts have to decide if the words in a statute should be taken literally, if a change in meaning is allowed to prevent a ridiculous outcome, or if the law should be interpreted according to the problem that the lawmakers intended to solve.¹ These three traditional rules that still guide this discussion are the Literal Rule, the Golden Rule, and the Mischief Rule.² Usually treated as distinct, these rules, however, have found their way into Indian judicial reasoning as an integrated approach to statutory text, context, and authorial intent, where the courts have journeyed from language to legislative purpose as justice and statutory coherence demanded.³

After delineating the theoretical bases of these three rules, this article illustrates their usage in India with specific reference to the R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala case (1957).⁴ It is pointed out that Chamarbaugwala has been instrumental in establishing that Supreme Court was, even during those times, willing to not interpret the legal provisions on prize competitions in such a broad way that all such competitions get equated with gambling and thus criminalized. They drew a distinction between skill competitions and chance-based games.⁵ After the detailed study of Bengal Immunity Co. vs. State of Bihar and Reserve Bank of India vs. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd., the authors try to portray Indian law's shift from strict formalism to a purposive interpretive mode.⁶ At the heart of this discussion is the finding that the best contemporary method is regulated purposivism: starting with the text, courts must then read the text with the statute as a whole, find the mischief the statute was enacted to remedy, and interpret in a way that furthers, not hinders, the legislative plan.

B. KEYWORDS:

Statutory Interpretation, Literal Rule, Golden Rule, Mischief Rule, Purposive Construction, Legislative Intent, Indian Judiciary, *R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala*

C. INTRODUCTION:

Legal reasoning depends on statute interpretation because legislators cannot foresee all future real-world situations that will emerge in court cases. Statutes use general language, but actual legal proceedings need specific language to resolve conflicts between different legal rights and responsibilities and their associated policy outcomes.⁸ The judicial role extends beyond basic reading because judges must determine which functions the text will fulfill in relation to the complete legislative framework. Common law systems depend on three fundamental interpretation methods which include the Literal Rule and the Golden Rule and the Mischief Rule.⁹ The Literal Rule directs the court to give statutory words their ordinary and grammatical meaning where the language is clear.⁹ The Golden Rule allows departure from that ordinary meaning where strict literal interpretation leads to absurdity, inconsistency or manifest injustice.¹⁰ The Mischief Rule requires courts to determine which element of existing legislation created the issue while they must interpret the law in a way that eliminates that issue and achieves the legislative solution which lawmakers intended.

The Indian legal system has become more dependent on these regulations because current statutes now control various complicated matters including economic regulations, welfare systems, constitutional operations, and digital economic markets. The plain meaning of legal texts requires assessment through statutory components and the purposes of laws and the effects on society. The judicial system needs to restrict its interpretive rights because judges must not create new laws through their explanations of existing statutes. The law needs protection from exact word interpretations which would hinder its true objectives. This paper examines the Literal Rule, Golden Rule and Mischief Rule through a comparative study which focuses on *R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala v. Union of India (1957)*.¹⁴ The case shows how courts used early judicial methods to create limits on legal language by identifying actual legislative purposes which exceed their maximum scope. The research demonstrates that Indian statutory interpretation has developed into a unified system which emphasizes textual analysis but

¹ State of Bombay v. R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala and Anr., (1957) 1 SCR 526, AIR 1957 SC 699.
latest laws

requires context-based understanding and legislative intention to determine meaning.²

D. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The main goals of this study are as follows:

- This study will look at how the Literal Rule and the Golden Rule and the Mischief Ruler's used to understand laws.
- The study will see how these rules work in courts by looking at their good and bad points.
- The case of R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala v. Union of India from 1957 shows how important these rules are for understanding laws.
- This study will look at how other court decisions, like Bengal Immunity Co. V. State of Bihar and Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance and Investment Co. Ltd. have helped shape the way laws are interpreted in India.
- The study will check if the Literal Rule and the Golden Rule and the Mischief Rule are still important, for understanding Indian laws.

E. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This paper uses doctrinal legal research as its foundation. Its legal research depends on judicial interpretation of case law and the examination of statutory interpretation materials which exist in academic literature.²² The method adopted is analytical and comparative. The research assesses court decisions which explain how judges shift from plain meaning interpretation to their use of contextual and purposive reasoning.

The research focuses on established legal precedents. The R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala case serves as the primary basis for research because it demonstrates how literal reading of texts relates to understanding their intended meaning.²³ The analysis proceeds to later cases which demonstrate how Indian statutory interpretation uses contextual and purposive methods.²⁴

F. THE THREE CLASSICAL RULES OF INTERPRETATION:

Literal Rule

Statutory interpretation begins with the Literal Rule which functions as the fundamental rule for interpreting statutes. The rule requires that clear legislative text must be interpreted through

² Jambholkar, R. (2023). *Interpretation of statutes: Role of judiciary.* *Journal of Legal Research and Juridical Sciences*, 92, 873–890

its basic natural and normal grammatical definitions.²⁵ The first principle of the rule establishes enacted text as the most trustworthy indication of legislative purpose, while judges must base their decisions only on the written text that legislators selected.²⁶

The rule delivers significant benefits through its implementation. The system produces trustworthy results which judicial officials will follow without making unexpected decisions. The system upholds constitutional principles because it allows courts to interpret laws but prevents them from creating new legislation.²⁷ The principle holds particular significance for penal and taxing laws because it enables individuals to determine their legal responsibilities from the actual text of the law.²⁸ The method of literal interpretation shows its limits because it fails to cover all situations. The statute's whole context creates uncertainty when plain words face examination through complete statutory language.²⁹

Golden Rule

The Golden Rule exists as a modification of the Literal Rule according to common view. The court begins with the ordinary meaning of the words, but it may depart from that meaning when literal interpretation leads to absurdity, contradiction, inconsistency or manifest injustice.³⁰ The Golden Rule operates as a system that enables courts to eliminate irrational outcomes while maintaining the primary importance of statutory language.

The system provides useful benefits because it permits multiple applications. The system enables courts to reach decisions which better match the actual intentions of the legislative body.³² The system becomes difficult to use because it depends on judges to determine what constitutes absurdity. One judge considers something to be absurd while another judge views it as a situation that merely brings difficulties.³³ The Golden Rule becomes beneficial in many situations which appear according to common practice.³

H. R.M.D. CHAMARBAUGWALLA v. UNION OF INDIA (1957): A

STUDY:

R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala v. Union of India is a deal in constitutional law. It is also very important when we talk about understanding laws. The problem was about how to treat prize competitions in a way. It was about knowing the difference between competitions that need skill and those that are mostly about luck.

³ <https://jlrs.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/92.-Rupa-Jambholkar.pdf>

The case brought up a question about how to interpret the law. Should the law cover all prize competitions? Should it be more specific? This is what *R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala v. Union of India* is really about. **R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala v. Union of India** is a case that makes us think about how to understand the laws and the constitution of India in relation to *R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala, v. Union of India*.

The Supreme Court did not follow a word-for-word approach. The Court made groups of laws that included activities needing skill.

* The Courts distinction helped keep the law from being interpreted much. The main point of the case is that the Court understood the law based on what it was meant to do. This case shows an example of purposive reasoning in Indian law. The Court did not ignore the text; it interpreted the law based on the problem it was trying to fix. The judgment is important because it shows that Indian courts, in the 1950s were willing to go beyond literal interpretation. The courts did this when following the meaning would upset the balance of laws and the Constitution.

I. OTHER IMPORTANT INDIAN PRECEDENTS:

1. Bengal Immunity Co. v. State of Bihar⁴

In *Bengal Immunity Co. v. State of Bihar*, The Supreme Court reached its decision through reasoning that followed the Mischief Rule while examining Article 286 and the constitutional framework for inter-State sales tax assessment.⁴⁹ The Court studied earlier legal disorder to understand the constitutional text which it interpreted in a way that stopped the Constitution's intended solution from being put into effect.⁵⁰ The case demonstrates how mischief-based interpretation applies to both regular laws and constitutional texts which depend on historical legal development and institutional structure.⁵

2. Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd.⁶

⁴ The Bengal Immunity Co. Ltd. v. State of Bihar, AIR 1955 SC 661, (1955) 2 SCR 649.
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⁵ Bengal Immunity Co. Ltd. v. State of Bihar – Case Study, I-Pleaders (18 September 2024), available at: <https://blog.ipleaders.in/bengal-immunity-co-ltd-v-the-state-of-bihar-1955-case-study/> (last visited 30 March 2026).

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⁶ Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd., 1987 AIR 1375, (1987) 2 SCC 74.
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The Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd. Is an important Indian case that shows how we should interpret legal texts. We should look at the purpose and context of the Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd. When we are trying to understand what the law means.

The Court said that when we interpret laws, we cannot just look at words by themselves. We have to look at the Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd. See how the words fit into the bigger picture and the purpose of the law. The Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd. Judgment is very important because it clearly states what other cases have suggested. We cannot really understand the Reserve Bank of India, v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd. Unless we look at it as part of the law.⁷

Together, *R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala*, *Bengal Immunity*, and *Peerless* reveal the development of Indian interpretation from rule-based formalism toward integrated purposive analysis.⁵³

J. EVOLVING APPLICATION IN MODERN STATUTES:

The classical rules remain valuable because they offer conceptual clarity, but modern Indian Legal adjudication does not treat them as distinct separate entities. Current regulations and welfare cases and constitutional governance cases now require courts to blend textual analysis with contextual understanding and statutory organization and the legislative purpose of legislation⁵⁴.

The legislative process has become more complex because various legal statutes require courts to move beyond traditional methods of interpreting texts. Three developments are particularly notable. The first point explains how courts now treat statutory schemes as more important than they used to.⁵⁵ The second point shows that people now see absurdity as a linguistic peculiarity which shows that someone read the text without understanding its surrounding context.⁵⁶ The third point states that purposive interpretation has become more common because modern statutes require courts to create solutions for broad social and economic issues which need more than dictionary definitions.⁵⁷

⁷ Reserve Bank of India v. Peerless General Finance & Investment Co. Ltd., Law Bhoomi (15 December 2025), available at: <https://lawbhoomi.com/reserve-bank-of-india-v-peerless-general-finance-investment-co-ltd/> (last visited 30 March 2026).
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The court system uses the Literal Rule to interpret laws through direct word analysis.⁵⁸ The process of reading the law starts with literal understanding which determines the result when the text remains clear and coherent.⁵⁸ The courts use contextual and purposive reasoning based on the Mischief Rule when literalism obstructs the goals of the enactment.⁵⁹

K. CRITICAL ANALYSIS:

The judicial system appears to support democratic principles through its strict application of literal legal interpretation which limits judicial power but this interpretation method fails to account for the future development of legal situations because its linguistic limits prevent complete comprehension of all potential future occurrences.⁶⁰ The application of literalism results in legal outcomes that achieve formal legal standing yet deliver inadequate results. The complete absence of context creates problems for remedial and regulatory statutes because it prevents proper implementation of legislative objectives.

The Golden Rule provides a limited safety mechanism, but it does not fully answer the deeper problem. The process of interpretive disputes actually examines two different aspects because it involves deciding whether to evaluate statutory words as separate entities or to consider their connection with the legal matter which the legislation addresses.⁶³ The Mischief Rule modern purposive form establishes the most effective solution because it interprets statutes as instruments which solve problems while maintaining judicial adherence to the established legal framework.⁶³

The discipline of purposive interpretation requires strict boundaries Courts should not try to figure out what the people who made the law wanted. They should just look at what the law says. The best way to do this is to start with the words of the law think about what would happen if we interpret it in a way look at what the people who made the law were trying to fix and then interpret the law so that it makes sense and follows the rules. This way the law will be fair. Will work the way it is supposed to. Courts should always look at the law. Try to understand what the people who made the law were trying to say when they wrote the words of the law. The law should be interpreted so that the law remains a law and is fair to everyone and courts should respect the law and interpret the law in a way that is faithful, to the law.⁸

⁸ Bhattacharyya, P. (2020). *The interpretation of statutes: Context and principles*. *Indian Journal of Constitutional Law*, 8, 43–75.

L. FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS:

The study yields the following findings:

- The Literal Rule remains the formal starting point of statutory interpretation in India.⁶⁶
- The Golden Rule serves as a narrow corrective tool where plain meaning produces anomaly or injustice.⁶⁷
- The Mischief Rule has become the foundation of modern purposive interpretation in Indian jurisprudence.^{68⁹}
- *R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala* demonstrates that Indian courts were willing at an early stage to distinguish legislative object from mere verbal breadth.⁶⁹
- Later decisions such as *Peerless* confirm that statutory meaning must be derived from text read in context and as part of a larger statutory scheme.⁷⁰

The following suggestions emerge from the study:

- The classical tripartite method of legal education should not simply comprise three distinct, separate concepts but be taught as interrelated concepts. ⁷¹
- Judicial reasoning should be sufficiently understood so that it can be explained when and why literal construction is converted into purposive construction. ⁷²
- A preference for context over dictionary definitions in relation to the interpretation of contemporary regulatory and welfare statutes should exist as a result of the legislative intent being undermined if the dictionary definition is used. ⁷³
- Purposeful construction should remain evenly balanced in terms of its textual and structural content so that the judge's power in interpreting a statute will not exceed that which was intended by the legislature.¹⁰

M. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:

The study compares three legal rules which include Literal Rule Golden Rule and Mischief Rule to show how Indian statutory interpretation has developed from strict formalism to a comprehensive system of interpretation.⁷⁵ The Legal system needs the Literal Rule because it must use written law to interpret statutes.⁷⁶ The Golden Rule remains relevant where literal meaning produces contradiction or clear injustice.⁷⁶ The rule known as Mischief Rule has

⁹ Interpretation of Statutes and Principles of Legislation, CNLU, PDF (2022).
cnlu.ac

¹⁰ Anamika Kundu & Vasavi Khatri, *1976 to 2017: The Transformation of the Tribunal System in India*, 8 *Indian J. Const. L.* 43 (2019).

become the main basis for modern purposive interpretation because it shows how statutory language relates to the legislative solution which lawmakers wanted to create.⁷⁷¹¹

The case *R.M.D. Chamarbaugwala v. Union of India* maintains its importance because it demonstrates how the Court protects legislative intent by blocking excessive literal interpretation.⁷⁸ Modern authorities such as *Peerless* demonstrate better understanding of statutory meaning because readers need to consider words within their complete context and statutory framework while they examine the legislative goals behind the law.⁷⁹ The present-day most convincing model maintains its textual integrity through disciplined purposivism which enables legal systems to function properly while delivering precise solutions to their intended goals.⁸⁰¹²

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¹¹ Rule of Literal Interpretation in India, Scribd (23 July 2025), available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/841268865/Rule-of-Literal-Interpretation-in-India> (last visited 30 March 2026).

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¹² Interpretation of Statutes and Principles of Legislation, CNLU (2022), PDF, available at: <https://www.cnlu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Interpretation-of-Statutes-and-Principles-of-Legislation.pdf> (last visited 30 March 2026).

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