



From Dharma to the Rule of Law: The Historical Development of the Indian Legal System

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ABSTRACT

The Indian legal system is one of the oldest and most dynamic legal traditions in the world, reflecting centuries of social, political, and cultural transformation. This paper examines the historical development of the Indian legal system, tracing its evolution from the ancient concept of dharma to the contemporary constitutional framework based on the rule of law. It begins by analysing the foundations of ancient Hindu jurisprudence, where legal norms were derived from the Vedas, Smritis, customs, and religious principles. The study then explores the legal administration during the medieval period, highlighting the influence of Islamic jurisprudence under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, while emphasizing the coexistence of diverse legal traditions through the principle of legal pluralism. The paper further investigates the profound transformation brought about by British colonial rule, particularly the introduction of codified laws, modern courts, and the common law tradition, which significantly reshaped India's indigenous legal institutions. Finally, it examines the transition to an independent constitutional democracy, where the Constitution of India established the supremacy of law, fundamental rights, judicial independence, and equality before the law as the cornerstones of governance. By adopting a historical and doctrinal research methodology, the study critically evaluates the continuity and transformation of legal institutions across different historical periods. It argues that the modern Indian legal system is not merely a colonial inheritance but a composite legal framework that integrates indigenous traditions, colonial legal principles, and constitutional values. The paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical foundations of Indian jurisprudence and demonstrates how the evolution from dharma to the rule of law continues to influence contemporary legal thought, governance, and the administration of justice in India.

KEYWORDS: Indian Legal System, Dharma, Rule of Law, Legal History, Colonial Law, Constitutionalism, Legal Pluralism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The origins of the Indian legal system lie in the ancient concept of *dharma*, which served as the fundamental principle governing justice, governance, and social order. The Sanskrit term “Dharma” or pali “Dhamma” had been translated into English as Religion of law. Dharma is that which produces harmony of work between dualism of human nature yoking the horse of egoism to the care of altruism. Dharma keeps the whole and in order as reins do the horses¹.

Classical Hindu law is founded on the concept of ‘dharma’, which means righteousness or duty, and also connotes ‘law’². Literary elucidations of dharma can be sourced from the Vedas (shruti: divine or sacred law owing to its divine authorship), Smritis³ (based on the concepts elucidated in the shrutis, but authored by smritikars, and ergo retaining only some aspects of divinity), and achara (practices and customs of the people). The principal sources of ancient Hindu law were the **Shrutis (Vedas)**, **Smritis**, and **Acharya (customary practices)**. The smritis are divided into the sutras and the dharmasastras⁴.

First all four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva) contain references of different dimensions of dharma. These can be better understood with the help of the Smritis, which contain a retelling of traditions and customs that include duties and obligations that find mention in the Vedas themselves. Acharya comprise those norms of a community or group that are relied upon to ascertain dharma on particular matters upon which the Vedas and the Smritis are both silent. In this way, there is a deep connection between these three sources in terms of their authoritative value⁵. The king himself had to remain in conformity with dharma, that is, he could not digress from his kingly duties as per these dharmic sources. In ancient India, kingly duties were based primarily

on the attainment of *dharma*, closely related to these, the attainment of *artha* and *kama*. The term 'artha' can be taken to mean the enjoyment of property, and 'kama', the maintenance of law and order and the legal system. In this context, *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* make up the *trivarga* ideal that conceptualizes the dominance of the role of the state (king) in matters of property, family, and caste⁶. According to Maine, the first concept of 'state' in ancient India not only embodied as spirit of legal pluralism, but was also subservient to society. The state was not elevated to a higher pedestal than society itself; rather, the former existed in service of the latter⁷ (Maine, 1861).

An important feature of ancient Hindu jurisprudence was that **the king was not regarded as the ultimate source of law**. His authority was limited by *dharma*, and the administration of justice required him to govern in accordance with established legal and moral principles. Judicial decision-making was therefore constrained by religious texts, customary law, and the advice of learned scholars rather than the ruler's personal discretion. This conception distinguished the ancient Indian legal tradition from systems founded upon unrestricted sovereign authority and reflected an early commitment to the supremacy of normative principles over arbitrary political power.

The legal structure of ancient India also demonstrates a sophisticated form of **legal pluralism**, wherein scriptural authority, customary practices, and local institutions coexisted to regulate different aspects of social life. Rather than relying upon a single codified legal system, ancient Indian jurisprudence recognised multiple centres of legal authority capable of responding to regional diversity and evolving societal needs. This flexibility contributed significantly to the resilience of the Hindu legal tradition and influenced the subsequent development of India's legal system, many features of which continued to shape judicial thought during the medieval and colonial periods.

The Position of the King and the Administration of Justice under Ancient Hindu Law

The philosophical foundation of *dharma* not only governed the conduct of individuals but also determined the nature and limits of political authority in ancient India. Unlike the modern doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty, where the State is regarded as the primary source of law, the ancient Hindu legal system conceived the king as the guardian and executor of *dharma* rather than its creator. His authority was therefore neither absolute nor arbitrary; it was circumscribed by pre-existing legal, moral, and religious principles recognised by society. The king was expected to administer justice in accordance with the prescriptions contained in the Vedas, Smritis, and established customs. His foremost obligation was to preserve *dharma*, protect the rights of his subjects, maintain public order, and ensure the equitable resolution of disputes. Ancient jurists considered the ruler accountable to the normative framework of *dharma*, implying that the legitimacy of kingship depended not merely upon political power but upon adherence to recognised principles of justice and ethical governance. Consequently, the ruler could not disregard established legal traditions for personal or political convenience.

Ancient Indian political philosophy further conceptualised the duties of the ruler through the doctrine of **Trivarga**, comprising *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*. While *dharma* represented justice and moral order, *artha* denoted material prosperity and effective administration, and *kama* signified the legitimate welfare and well-being of society. These principles were viewed as complementary objectives of governance rather than competing interests. A successful ruler was therefore expected to maintain a careful balance between justice, economic stability, and social welfare, recognising that sustainable political authority depended upon the harmonious pursuit of all three objectives.

From a constitutional and jurisprudential perspective, the ancient Indian conception of kingship demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the principle that governmental authority must operate within the limits of law. Although ancient Hindu law differed fundamentally from modern constitutionalism, it nevertheless recognised an early form of limited government by subjecting the ruler to *dharma*. This principle bears a conceptual resemblance to the modern doctrine of the **Rule of Law**, which rejects arbitrary exercise of power and requires every public authority to act according to established legal norms.

Moreover, the subordination of the king to *dharma* illustrates that ancient Indian jurisprudence did not embrace legal absolutism. Instead, it recognised that law derived its legitimacy from society's shared moral and customary values rather than from the unilateral will of the sovereign. This pluralistic conception of law enabled the legal system to accommodate regional customs and community practices while preserving normative consistency. In many respects, this historical model anticipated contemporary constitutional values that emphasise accountability, fairness, and restraint in the exercise of governmental power. Therefore, the contribution of ancient Hindu jurisprudence lies not only in its historical significance but also in its enduring influence on the philosophical foundations of the Indian legal system.

The authority of the king in ancient India was neither absolute nor unrestricted. Unlike the modern concept of sovereignty, where the State is recognised as the supreme law-making authority, the ancient Hindu legal system regarded the ruler as subject to the higher authority of *dharma*. The king was expected to govern in

conformity with established legal, moral, and religious principles, and any deviation from these principles was considered inconsistent with the legitimate exercise of political power. Consequently, the ruler derived his authority from *dharma* rather than from personal will or military strength.

The responsibilities of the king were guided by the doctrine of **Trivarga**, comprising *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*. These three objectives collectively defined the ideal framework of governance in ancient India. *Dharma* represented justice, righteousness, and the ethical administration of law; *artha* emphasised economic prosperity, protection of property, and efficient governance; while *kama* reflected the legitimate welfare and orderly social life of the people. Rather than functioning as isolated ideals, these principles were viewed as mutually reinforcing, requiring the ruler to maintain harmony between justice, public administration, and societal well-being.²

An equally distinctive characteristic of the ancient Indian legal system was its conception of the relationship between the State and society. Sir Henry Maine observed that the earliest idea of the Indian State embodied a spirit of legal pluralism in which political authority remained subordinate to society and its established institutions. Law was not considered the exclusive creation of the ruler but emerged from recognised customs, religious texts, and long-established social practices. Accordingly, the king functioned as the protector and administrator of an existing legal order rather than its sole legislator. This approach enabled local customs and community practices to coexist within a broader normative framework founded upon *dharma*.

From a jurisprudential perspective, the ancient Hindu conception of kingship reflects an early recognition of the principle that governmental authority must remain subject to law rather than above it. Although ancient India did not possess a written constitution in the modern sense, the supremacy of *dharma* imposed substantive limitations on political power and discouraged arbitrary governance. This historical model demonstrates that accountability was regarded as an essential attribute of legitimate rule long before the emergence of modern constitutional democracies.

Furthermore, the subordination of the State to society illustrates a distinctive feature of Indian legal thought. Instead of concentrating all legal authority in the ruler, the ancient legal system recognised multiple sources of law, including sacred texts, customary practices, and community institutions. Such legal pluralism promoted flexibility, accommodated India's social diversity, and contributed to the stability of its legal order. The enduring relevance of these principles is reflected in contemporary constitutional values such as the Rule of Law, limited government, judicial accountability, and respect for India's pluralistic social structure. Thus, the ancient Indian theory of governance represents not merely a historical stage in legal development but an enduring philosophical foundation that continues to influence the evolution of the Indian legal system.

Colonial Transformation of Hindu Law

The colonial period represents one of the most transformative phases in the history of the Indian legal system. While earlier political regimes largely accommodated existing legal traditions, British rule fundamentally altered the structure, interpretation, and administration of Hindu law. Several legal historians have observed that the changes introduced during the colonial era were unprecedented in both their scope and their long-term impact on India's legal development.

The process of transformation began with Warren Hastings' Judicial Plan of 1772, which sought to administer justice by applying Hindu law to Hindus and Muslim law to Muslims in matters of personal law. However, the British administration encountered considerable difficulty in understanding India's diverse legal traditions because Hindu law was neither contained in a single authoritative code nor uniformly practised throughout the subcontinent. Consequently, colonial judges increasingly relied upon translated Sanskrit texts, commentaries, and the opinions of court-appointed scholars to determine the applicable law.

This process gradually altered the character of Hindu law. Rather than preserving indigenous jurisprudence in its original form, colonial administrators reconstructed it through English legal concepts, judicial precedents, and statutory methods of interpretation. The outcome was not a continuation of classical Hindu law but the emergence of what scholars describe as **Anglo-Hindu law**—a hybrid legal system combining traditional Hindu legal principles with the institutional framework and interpretative methodology of English common law.

The transformation extended beyond substantive legal rules to the broader administration of justice. Ancient India possessed sophisticated legal institutions, recognised multiple sources of law, and developed distinct methods of adjudication under different kingdoms and rulers. These legal institutions evolved organically in response to changing social and political conditions. The colonial administration, however, replaced much of this flexible and decentralised legal order with a centralised judicial hierarchy, codified legislation, and uniform procedural rules designed primarily to facilitate imperial governance.

From a legal-historical perspective, the emergence of Anglo-Hindu law illustrates that colonial legal reform was not merely an exercise in preserving indigenous traditions but a process of selective reconstruction. By interpreting Hindu legal texts through English jurisprudential methods, colonial courts transformed a dynamic and pluralistic legal tradition into a more rigid and text-centred legal system. Although this process enhanced certainty and institutional uniformity, it also reduced the significance of regional customs, local practices, and

community-based dispute resolution that had historically constituted essential components of Hindu jurisprudence.

The authority of the king in ancient India was neither absolute nor unrestricted. Unlike the modern concept of sovereignty, where the State is recognised as the supreme law-making authority, the ancient Hindu legal system regarded the ruler as subject to the higher authority of *dharma*. The king was expected to govern in conformity with established legal, moral, and religious principles, and any deviation from these principles was considered inconsistent with the legitimate exercise of political power. Consequently, the ruler derived his authority from *dharma* rather than from personal will or military strength.¹

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The judicial set-up at the Presidency town of Calcutta was different from the one at the *moffusil*, or interiors. The Royal Charter of 1774 replaced the Mayor's Court with the first Supreme Court at Calcutta⁸. In the long run, however, it seemed less viable to continue with this dual system, and later in 1861 it came to an end with the amalgamation of the Supreme Courts and the company's court into the high court⁹.

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Administrative and Judicial Structure under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire

The medieval Indian legal system was characterised by a well-organised administrative hierarchy in which executive and judicial authority were closely interconnected. During the Delhi Sultanate, the Sultan occupied the highest position in the political and legal order, exercising supreme authority over governance, military administration, and the dispensation of justice. Nevertheless, the effective administration of the State depended upon a structured network of officials who assisted the Sultan in performing both executive and judicial functions.

The central administration was organised through the **Diwan-i-Wazarat**, a council of ministers responsible for different branches of governance. Alongside the Wazirs, several specialised officials played significant roles in maintaining the administration of justice and public order. These included the **Qazi-ul-Quzat (Chief Justice)**, who supervised judicial administration; the **Sadr-us-Sudur**, responsible for religious and ecclesiastical affairs; the **Ariz-i-Mumalik**, who administered military affairs; the **Dabir-i-Khas**, entrusted with state records and official correspondence; and the **Barid-ul-Mumalik**, who supervised intelligence and communication throughout the kingdom. This institutional arrangement illustrates that judicial administration was regarded as an essential component of statecraft rather than an isolated governmental function.

The Mughal Empire retained the fundamental framework established during the Sultanate but expanded and refined it to govern a much larger and more diverse empire. The Mughal Emperor exercised supreme political and judicial authority, while an organised council of ministers managed specialised departments of administration. In addition to offices inherited from the Sultanate, the Mughal administration introduced positions such as the **Khan-i-Saman**, responsible for the imperial household; the **Daroga**, who supervised the royal mint; the **Nazir Burjutat**, associated with public works and engineering; and the **Muhtasib**, entrusted with maintaining public morality and market regulation. These offices reflected the increasing complexity and institutional sophistication of Mughal governance.

One of the most significant contributions of the Mughal administration was the establishment of a highly organised territorial hierarchy. The Empire was divided into **Subas (provinces)**, each governed by a **Subadar**, which were further subdivided into **Sarkars**, **Parganas**, and finally **villages**. This decentralised administrative structure enabled the effective implementation of governmental policies while preserving local autonomy in matters of day-to-day administration and dispute resolution. Rather than replacing existing indigenous institutions, the Mughal rulers generally permitted local customs, village institutions, and community-based judicial practices to continue, subject to the supervisory jurisdiction of higher authorities and the application of Islamic legal principles where appropriate.

The coexistence of imperial administration with customary local institutions demonstrates the pragmatic nature of medieval governance. Although Islamic jurisprudence influenced the judicial system, its implementation was frequently moderated by practical considerations arising from India's social and cultural diversity. Consequently, the medieval legal order remained pluralistic, accommodating religious law, customary practices, and local administrative traditions within a unified imperial framework.

Nature of the Pre-Colonial Indian State and Legal Pluralism

The nature of the Indian State before the advent of British rule has remained a subject of considerable scholarly debate. While some scholars characterise the ancient and medieval Indian polities as predominantly theocratic because of the close relationship between governance and religion, such a characterisation does not fully capture the complexity of the Indian legal tradition. Although religious principles undoubtedly influenced political authority, governance was not exclusively determined by religious doctrine. Instead, legal administration evolved through a dynamic interaction between religious norms, customary practices, political institutions, and local administrative requirements. The Indian laws and courts are closely modelled on the English pattern.

An important contribution to this development is attributed to **Kautilya (Chanakya)**, whose *Arthashastra* presented a pragmatic theory of governance that distinguished the functions of the State from purely religious obligations. Unlike systems in which political authority was derived exclusively from ecclesiastical institutions, Kautilya emphasised effective administration, public welfare, economic stability, national security, and the maintenance of justice as the primary responsibilities of the ruler. This pragmatic conception of

governance represented a significant intellectual development in Indian political and legal thought and anticipated later discussions concerning the functional distinction between religion and State administration.

Another distinctive characteristic of the pre-colonial Indian legal system was the coexistence of multiple institutions responsible for the administration of justice. Alongside royal courts established by the State, customary institutions operating at the village, tribal, and community levels continued to resolve disputes according to local traditions and established practices. These informal bodies functioned harmoniously with formal judicial institutions at the district, provincial, and central levels, thereby creating a legal system that accommodated both institutional authority and community autonomy.

Immediately before the consolidation of British rule, the Indian subcontinent consisted of more than five hundred kingdoms, principalities, and political entities, each possessing its own administrative framework, judicial institutions, and methods of recognising and enforcing legal norms. Consequently, India did not possess a single uniform legal system; instead, its legal landscape was characterised by extensive diversity, with multiple normative orders operating simultaneously across different regions and communities. This institutional diversity reflected the historical evolution of Indian jurisprudence, where legal legitimacy derived from a combination of royal authority, customary practices, religious principles, and local governance. Inauthorised traders were liable to be punished by forfeiture of their goods and ships.¹⁰

From a jurisprudential perspective, the pre-colonial Indian legal system demonstrates that legal pluralism constituted one of the defining characteristics of India's legal heritage. Rather than seeking complete legal uniformity, the various kingdoms recognised that effective governance in a culturally and linguistically diverse society required accommodation of regional customs, community institutions, and established legal traditions. This flexible approach enabled the coexistence of formal courts and informal dispute-resolution mechanisms without undermining political stability.

Equally significant is Kautilya's contribution to Indian legal thought. His emphasis on administrative efficiency, public welfare, and rational governance illustrates that the legitimacy of the State depended not solely upon religious authority but also upon its capacity to maintain justice and protect the interests of its subjects. Although modern constitutional secularism differs fundamentally from the political philosophy of the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya's pragmatic conception of governance reflects an early recognition that effective legal administration requires the State to act in accordance with principles of justice, accountability, and public welfare rather than religious considerations alone.

The historical experience of pre-colonial India therefore challenges the simplistic perception that the Indian legal system evolved through a single homogeneous tradition. Instead, it developed through the interaction of diverse legal orders, regional institutions, customary practices, and political philosophies. This tradition of legal accommodation continues to influence contemporary Indian constitutionalism, where unity is maintained not by eliminating diversity but by recognising and regulating it within a common constitutional framework.

British Scheme of Administration of Justice

The establishment of British rule marked a decisive phase in the evolution of the Indian legal system. Although the East India Company initially inherited the Mughal judicial framework after acquiring territorial authority, it soon concluded that the existing system was incapable of ensuring effective governance. Warren Hastings observed that judicial administration had become inefficient because judicial authority had largely passed into the hands of revenue officials, whose exercise of power was often influenced by private interests rather than impartial justice.¹ This assessment became the foundation for the first comprehensive programme of judicial reform introduced by the British administration.

The Judicial Plan of 1772–1773 introduced two significant structural reforms that permanently influenced the development of Indian law. First, judicial administration was decentralised by establishing separate civil (*Diwani Adalats*) and criminal (*Faujdari Adalats*) courts throughout the provinces under the supervision of Company officials. Secondly, Hastings recognised that disputes concerning marriage, inheritance, succession, religious practices, and family relations should continue to be governed by the personal laws of Hindus and Muslims.² This policy reflected an early recognition of India's religious diversity while simultaneously enabling the colonial administration to exercise institutional control over the judicial process.

The judicial system established in the Presidency towns differed significantly from that operating in the mofussil regions. The Royal Charter of 1774 abolished the Mayor's Court and established the Supreme Court at Calcutta, introducing English legal procedure and judicial practices into British India. Consequently, two parallel judicial systems emerged: one administered by the Crown through the Supreme Courts and the other by the East India Company through the Sadar Courts. This institutional dualism continued until the Indian High Courts Act, 1861, unified these courts and laid the institutional foundation for India's present High Court system.³

During the first half of the nineteenth century, administrators such as Mountstuart Elphinstone, Lord William Bentinck, and Thomas Babington Macaulay regarded legal reform as an essential instrument for

improving colonial administration. However, the Revolt of 1857 fundamentally altered British legal policy. Thereafter, the emphasis shifted from liberal reform towards consolidating imperial authority through centralised legal institutions. The establishment of the First Law Commission in 1834 and the subsequent codification of civil and criminal laws reflected this objective of creating a uniform and administratively efficient legal system.⁴

The British administration also profoundly influenced the development of India's personal laws. Colonial judges frequently interpreted Hindu and Muslim law by relying upon religious scriptures and authoritative commentaries rather than the diverse customary practices that prevailed across different regions. Although customary law was occasionally recognised where it did not conflict with established legal principles, judicial interpretation increasingly reshaped indigenous legal traditions within the framework of English legal reasoning. Consequently, personal laws gradually became products of judicial construction rather than mere continuations of traditional practices.

Colonial legal scholarship further reinforced this transformation. Sir Henry Maine, in *Ancient Law* (1861), compared Hindu law with ancient Roman law and argued that both reflected patriarchal social structures in which the authority of the male head of the family predominated. His writings significantly influenced British legal policy and contributed to the perception that Indian society required legislative reform through colonial intervention. Earlier scholars such as Sir Henry Thomas Colebrooke had similarly interpreted Sanskrit legal texts in ways that shaped the administration of Hindu law within British courts. Later scholarship has demonstrated that many of these interpretations oversimplified the diversity and complexity of indigenous legal traditions.

The First Law Commission (1840) rejected the proposition that either Hindu law or Muslim law could serve as the general law (*lex loci*) of British India because both were inseparably connected with particular religious communities. In matters beyond personal law, English legal principles increasingly became the governing law. Although the major Indian codes sought to provide certainty, clarity, and uniformity, they remained deeply influenced by English common law, legal concepts, and judicial precedents. In 1843, slavery was declared illegal.

Furthermore, the colonial interpretation of Hindu and Muslim personal laws demonstrates that legal development during this period was neither entirely indigenous nor wholly English. Rather, it emerged through a process of selective adaptation in which colonial judges reconstructed existing legal traditions according to English jurisprudential methods. This process created a hybrid legal order that combined indigenous principles, colonial institutions, and codified legislation. Such hybridity explains why the contemporary Indian legal system continues to exhibit both common law characteristics and pluralistic personal law traditions.

From a constitutional perspective, the legacy of British legal administration presents a paradox. While colonial law frequently operated to preserve imperial interests, it also established institutional structures—including superior courts, codification, judicial procedure, and legal professionalism—that became indispensable after Independence. The framers of the Constitution retained many of these institutions but transformed their normative foundation by replacing colonial governance with constitutional supremacy, fundamental rights, judicial independence, and democratic accountability. Therefore, the British period should neither be romanticised as a purely civilising mission nor dismissed solely as an instrument of oppression. Its true historical significance lies in creating institutional foundations that independent India subsequently reoriented towards constitutionalism, social justice, and the rule of law.

Summing Up: Evolution, Colonial Transformation, and Contemporary Relevance

The historical evolution of the Indian legal system demonstrates that Indian jurisprudence has never been static but has continuously adapted to changing political, social, and cultural circumstances. From the normative foundations of *dharma* in ancient India to the pluralistic legal institutions of the medieval kingdoms and the codified legal framework introduced during the colonial period, each phase contributed distinct institutional and philosophical elements to the development of Indian law. Rather than replacing one another, these legal traditions interacted, evolved, and collectively shaped the legal identity of modern India.

British colonial administration undoubtedly transformed the Indian legal system by introducing codification, hierarchical courts, professional legal institutions, and procedural uniformity. These reforms established many institutional foundations that continue to operate within contemporary India. However, colonial legal reform was not merely a project of legal modernisation; it also served as an instrument of imperial governance. While British rule introduced concepts such as codified legislation, judicial hierarchy, and legal professionalism, it simultaneously weakened several indigenous institutions of dispute resolution and subordinated India's pluralistic legal traditions to colonial administrative priorities. Consequently, the emergence of the modern legal system must be understood as a process of legal reconstruction rather than simple legal progress.

The transition to a modern legal order brought three significant structural transformations. First, legal rules increasingly acquired uniform application through codified legislation applicable across territorial jurisdictions. Secondly, informal and community-based systems of dispute resolution gradually gave way to an

organised hierarchy of courts supported by appellate mechanisms, professional judges, and trained advocates. Finally, law became inseparably connected with the authority of the modern State, which assumed exclusive responsibility for the administration of justice and the enforcement of legal rights. These developments significantly enhanced institutional certainty, procedural consistency, and administrative efficiency, while simultaneously redefining the relationship between citizens and governmental authority.

Nevertheless, the constitutional transformation achieved after Independence did not automatically eliminate historical inequalities. Despite the adoption of one of the world's most progressive Constitutions, meaningful access to justice continues to remain uneven across different sections of Indian society. Socio-economic disparities, procedural delays, financial constraints, legal illiteracy, and unequal access to legal institutions continue to prevent many citizens from fully realising the constitutional guarantees of equality, liberty, and justice.³ Thus, the promise of constitutional rights often depends not merely upon their formal recognition but upon the State's capacity to ensure their effective implementation.

A careful examination of India's legal history reveals that the evolution of the legal system has been characterised by continuity as much as transformation. Ancient India's emphasis on *dharma*, the medieval commitment to legal pluralism, regional innovations in judicial administration, colonial codification, and constitutional democracy should not be viewed as isolated historical episodes but as interconnected stages in the gradual development of Indian jurisprudence. Each period inherited elements from its predecessors while simultaneously introducing new legal institutions responsive to contemporary political realities.

The most enduring feature of the Indian legal tradition has been its remarkable capacity for adaptation without complete abandonment of its historical foundations. Modern constitutionalism did not emerge in isolation; rather, it absorbed institutional discipline from the colonial judiciary, recognised India's longstanding legal diversity, and reoriented both within a democratic framework founded upon constitutional supremacy, fundamental rights, judicial independence, secularism, and the Rule of Law.

Therefore, the evolution of the Indian legal system cannot be understood simply as a movement from ancient to modern law. It represents a continuous process of institutional adaptation, legal pluralism, and constitutional transformation. The enduring challenge for contemporary India is not the creation of new legal principles but ensuring that the ideals embodied in the Constitution are translated into substantive justice for every citizen. The true measure of a legal system lies not merely in the sophistication of its institutions but in its ability to deliver accessible, equitable, and effective justice. It is this continuing pursuit of justice that defines both the historical evolution and the future trajectory of the Indian legal system.

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